Nuns are so hot right now *Margaret Mitchell* / **My run-in with Hugh Grant** *Sasha Swire*

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THE SPECTATOR

Burnham's bill

The new PM can't afford to please everyone, says *Tim Shipman*

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Don't move Mahmood

We currently know more about what Count Binface would do in power than Andy Burnham. The joke candidate in the Clacton by-election has published a manifesto that goes into considerably greater detail about what the government's priorities should be than anything we have yet heard from the man who becomes our prime minister on Monday. Those preparing for a new administration, including the Parliamentary Labour Party and the Civil Service, have had to rely on speculation and briefings to the press. There is no better guide to what we might expect than the analysis of our own political editor, Tim Shipman, on page 12.

He reports that the incoming premier has a high opinion of the Home Secretary, Shabana Mahmood. That reflects well on him. He is, apparently, minded to promote her yet higher still and install her as his chancellor. There is no doubt that she would run the Treasury better than most of the other candidates, such as Ed Miliband. But Burnham should look elsewhere for his chancellor, perhaps towards the hawkishly inclined Work and Pensions Secretary, Pat McFadden. This is not because Mahmood is second best for any role, but because she is far and away the best person to finish what she has started at the Home Office and reform our broken immigration system.

Even the windily irresolute Keir Starmer knew that we needed to restore sanity to our border controls. He may have quickly rowed back on his comments about uncontrolled migration making Britain an 'island of strangers' over fears he might have said something that voters actually agreed with, but under him Mahmood was empowered to show resolution in not just stopping the flow of new arrivals to these shores but also reversing recent failures in legal migration.

Small boat arrivals are humiliating enough, but between 2021 and 2024 an additional 2.5 million people moved to Britain. Ministerial blindness and departmental errors meant up to 50 times more people arrived on health and social care visas than expected. Loose rules around bringing dependents meant there was a ratio as high as 15:1 for every worker for certain countries. Plans to reform this system began under James Cleverly and Robert Jenrick. But Mahmood wants to tighten the rules around Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR), which is currently granted after a migrant has been in Britain for five years, entailing access to benefits, eligibility for social housing and citizenship for children, at the cost of billions for taxpayers. Mahmood also wants to restrict the ability of asylum seekers to stay permanently and smooth the deportation of illegal arrivals and foreign-born criminals, such as Shabir Ahmed, the Rochdale grooming gang ringleader.

The Home Secretary is far and away the best person to reform our broken immigration system

These measures are right. But they are far from popular among Mahmood's Labour comrades and the risk is that Burnham may seek to appease his backbenchers by either moving policy, or Mahmood, or both.

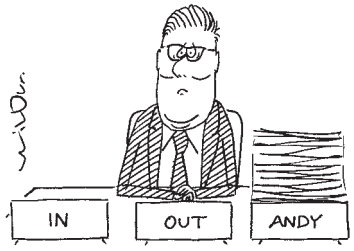
Nearly 80 Labour MPs have signed a letter calling for the Home Secretary's policies to be watered down. A poll of party members taken by LabourList in April ranked Mahmood as the least popular cabinet minister, with a favourability rating of minus 12. A mooted 'compromise' would see 1.6 million of the migrants who have arrived since 2021 gain ILR after five years, rather than the ten years Mahmood proposes, but not be eligible for benefits until several years after that. But this would merely delay the burden on the taxpayer and do nothing to fix the breach between politicians and the electorate, who have voted for reduced immigration at every available opportunity.

Mahmood's critics are missing what she calls her 'moral mission'. She has argued that Britain's multi-racial democracy has been disrupted by the pace and scale of recent immigration. Social tensions will only be eased and tolerance extended if there is confidence that ministers know who is arriving, that extremists and criminals are kept out and that control can be imposed when required. In her words, 'safety is a precondition of the open, tolerant, generous country that we want to be'.

There is also a political logic. Immigration remains one of the electorate's leading priorities. Nigel Farage may be distracted by Clacton, myriad investigations and the mourning of Ann Widdecombe, but Reform still tops the polls. There is no path to re-election for Labour that does not involve pushing back the teal tide. As one senior Labour figure recently put it, immigration failures outrage voters. They are a clear sign that the UK 'isn't functioning properly'; we must 'get back to a sense of order'.

That figure was Burnham. On his long and winding road from Manchester to Downing Street, the next prime minister has shown the same, to put it generously, breadth on immigration as he has on everything from Labour's fiscal rules to rejoining the EU, from transgender rights to the Waspi women. When Angela Rayner in March branded Mahmood's reforms 'un-British', Burnham suggested Labour would 'do well to listen to what [Rayner] has got to say'. But last month when it came to facing the voters of Makerfield – a constituency that voted 65 per cent Leave in 2016 – Burnham hailed the Home Office's successful deportations and said ministers must 'go further'. As a new MP, Burnham voted in favour of Mahmood's immigration bill last Monday.

There is no guarantee that Burnham will remain firm. With so much unclear – perhaps even to himself – about what he intends to do, it is unknown whether Mahmood will remain at the Home Office. If she goes, the pressure to capitulate will be immense. Were Burnham to fold, he would begin his premiership in the same appeasing spirit of his predecessor. For the sake of the country, and his reputation, he should ensure Mahmood has indefinite leave to remain at the Home Office.



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When I hear my friends talk about having a 'celibacy era', they sound more relieved than repressed.
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Governing as if running a Presbyterian charity bake sale was the Tories' problem.
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A few weeks ago, I hopped on the Victoria line, longing to sit down after a difficult day, and came up against a brindle-coloured mutt of some sort sitting happily on a priority seat beside its owner.
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CONTRIBUTORS

Sasha Swire writes this week's Diary on p7. Her most recent book is *Edgeland: A Slow Walk West*.

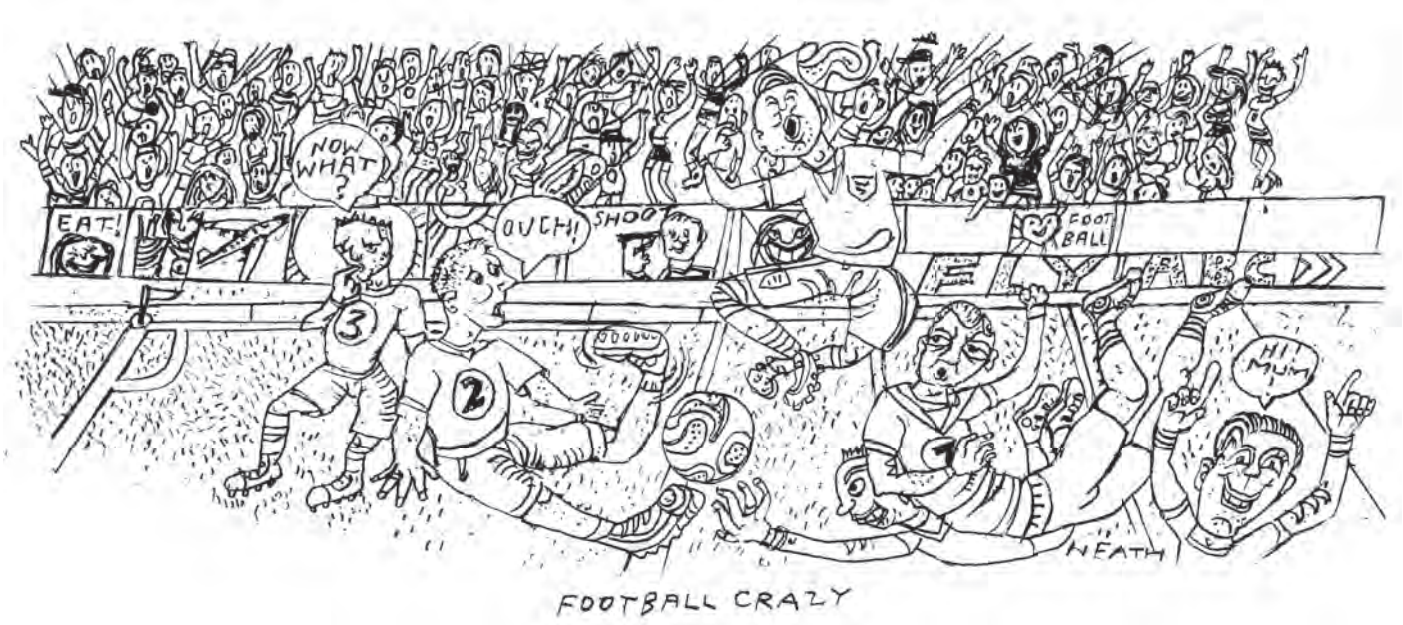
Margaret Mitchell is *The Spectator*'s US assistant editor. She writes about the craze for nunneries on p20.

Jonathan Sumption is a former Supreme Court Judge and author of a five-volume history of the Hundred Years War. He writes about the crusades on p30.

Jason Burke, who writes about Astrid Proll on p35, is the author of *The Revolutionists: The Story of the Extremists who Hijacked the 1970s*.

John Sturgis asks whether it's really kids buying Panini football stickers on p48. He is a freelance journalist and former deputy news editor of the *Sun*.

PORTRAIT OF THE WEEK



Home

Police launched a murder inquiry into the death of Ann Widdecombe, the former MP, aged 78. Her body was found with head wounds at her house on Dartmoor. They arrested a 28-year-old white British man in Rotherham, South Yorkshire. Counter-terrorism police took over the investigation two days later and rearrested the suspect on suspicion of commission, preparation or instigation of acts of terrorism. Police called it a 'targeted' attack. She had been a minister in Sir John Major's administration, an MEP for the Brexit Party and, since 2023, a member of Reform, serving as its immigration and justice spokesman.

Andy Burnham was nominated for the Labour leadership by 349 of Labour's 403 MPs, making it impossible for any rival to secure the 81 nominations needed to stand against him. In an interview with the *Guardian* he said: 'At the start of Israel's military action in Gaza my party didn't get it right… We've got to do more to put pressure on the Israeli government.' The Representation of the People Bill was delayed until September. Sir Stephen Timms, in a formal review, found the personal independence payment (Pip) 'not fit for purpose'; about 10 million, 24 per cent of working-age people, reported having a disability. The government proposed a midnight social media curfew for 16- and 17-year-olds. Sir Olly Robbins requested a judicial review to declare that his sacking by Sir Keir Starmer, the Prime Minister, was unlawful, unreasonable and would be quashed. The by-election at Clacton precipitated by Nigel Farage was set for 13 August. The Duke and Duchess of Sussex and their children, Archie and Lilibet, visited the King at Highgrove at teatime. In 2025, 5,957 baby boys were called Muhammad, 1,712 Mohammed and 895 Mohammad; only 127 babies were named Andrew.

Shabana Mahmood, the Home Secretary, announced that expressing a positive opinion of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, let alone assisting it, will now be punishable by up to 14 years in prison. Twelve people were arrested in connection with an alleged right-wing terror plot which caused the early closure of a gathering of 15,000 Muslims in the grounds of Shrubland Hall, Suffolk, organised by the radical Islamic movement Tablighi Jamaat. Patricia Greene, the actress who played Jill Archer for 68 years, died aged 95. Bonnie Tyler, the Welsh singer, died aged 75. In the seven days to 13 July, 585 migrants crossed the Channel, 128 in one boat. The Bayeux Tapestry arrived at the British Museum.

Abroad

America launched a fresh wave of strikes on Iran after Iran struck ships passing through the Strait of Hormuz. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps said that the Strait was closed. Iran struck American facilities in Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar and Jordan. President Donald Trump of America said that he was reinstating a blockade of Iranian ports in the Strait of Hormuz, and would impose a 20 per cent fee on all cargo shipped through it; but the next day he dropped the fee plan. Senator Lindsey Graham, the hawkish Republican, died aged 71. Cyclosporiasis, characterised by diarrhoea and caused by a microscopic parasite, affected 31 American states.

President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine announced a new prime minister in the third reshuffle since 2022. Russia used missiles to attack Kyiv and Odessa. In the Sea of Azov 25 Russian ships were hit and set on fire by Ukraine in four days. France gave Ukraine the blueprints for its Scalp-EG cruise missile. A wildfire at Los Gallardos, between Lorca and Almeria, in Andalusia, killed at least 13. A large wildfire raged in Fontainebleau forest 40 miles south of Paris. A fire at a shoe factory in the Chinese city of Jinjiang killed at least 28. A fire in a bar in Bangkok killed at least 28. Cubans banged pots and pans in protest at the third national power cut this year. The Volkswagen Group planned to cut up to 100,000 jobs.

The South African government said that more than 53,000 foreigners had been deported, mostly to Malawi, Zimbabwe and Mozambique, since a 'migration management' campaign began five weeks ago. De Beers suspended production at South Africa's biggest diamond mine in the face of competition from laboratory-grown diamonds. Border barriers between Gibraltar and Spain were dismantled; British visitors have to show passports to Spanish police. A woman held on to her husband's legs to stop him being sucked out of a broken cabin window on a Ryanair flight from Thessaloniki. CSH

DIARY

Sasha Swire

Hugh Grant, self-confessed grump and Fourth Estate muzzler, was at a drinks party I went to the other day in his old stomping ground of Notting Hill. It happened to be the day before he went to Makerfield to lend Andy Burnham his support. Grant was doing his occasional 'man of the people' act (Latymer Upper; New College, Oxford), having attached himself barnacle-like to the next PM in the apparent belief that Burnham will one day tame the wicked Murdoch/Rothermere press. How naive is that?

Anyway, I went up to him and said: 'Oh, you turned up in my husband's old constituency as well, and it was the absolute kiss of death.' He looked mildly amused. 'You lost then?' 'No, we won it outright. So, thank you.' I told him the constituency – East Devon – and could see him trying to clear the fog, so I thrust out my hand. 'Sasha Swire.' Grant, a lover of F1 and fast cars – you know what women say about men like that – jammed his foot on the accelerator, catapulting from stationary to take-off in one violent, neck-snapping surge. One moment he was idling, the next he was all flame and thrust. I was left standing there, soot-faced, eyebrows gone. I've never seen anyone take off that fast. 'I came to your fucking constituency to get rid of your absolute TWAT of a husband!' he thundered, 'twat' apparently being his preferred synonym for Conservative. 'But you don't even know my husband. How do you know he's a twat?' (As it happens, my husband, Hugo, wasn't even East Devon's candidate at the 2019 general election – he had already retired – but I forgot to mention that.) 'Just FUCK OFF. FUCK OFF, you vile, horrible woman.'

He then accused me of being drunk – I'd had half a glass of wine – and claimed I'd written horrible things about him in my published diary. Not true. I merely sketched him. If you're a B-movie romcom star campaigning in a general election, you can hardly expect a legal right to privacy. Politics is not a red-carpet premiere, with awkward people kept behind a velvet rope by overconfident PR women.

He kept swearing at me, spraying me with spit, until his leggy Swedish wife stepped between us. Her brow furrowed with concern, and looking as though she'd done this before, she quietly apologised and asked me to leave the conversation. So I did. An hour later, as we were heading out of the party, Grant was standing by the exit. I couldn't resist. 'Bye-bye,' I smiled. 'And thanks for the diary entry.' His face turned to stone.

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When I got home, my 'twat' of a husband was on Grant's side. 'Why did you provoke him again as we were leaving?' 'Because, Hugo, he'd just verbally assaulted me.' I added that had I been a man, Grant would never have spoken to me like that, because a man would probably have decked him there and then. And had my husband been a real man himself, he would have challenged him to pistols at dawn.

The following evening, at a rather more political drinks party in Chelsea, I ran into Thangam Debbonaire, the former MP for Bristol West, and told her about my altercation with Grant. 'I absolutely hate that man,' she said. 'He did exactly the same thing to me.' Apparently, when Debbonaire was shadow culture secretary, Grant came to lobby her on press regulation. Debbonaire told me that he launched into a furious rant, jabbing his finger in her face. She said everyone in the room was left trembling. Then, during the 2024 general election, Grant waded in again, as if on a personal vendetta against her, endorsing Green party co-leader Carla Denyer, who went on to unseat her. In Denyer's leaflet, Grant stated: 'It's so refreshing to see a politician with integrity, who puts the public first.' Denyer has recently taken a leave of absence to recover from 'burnout', putting herself first. Debbonaire, meanwhile, is sitting pretty in the House of Lords. Happy ending, as they say in the film business.

I come home to Devon, still slightly shaken by the drama. The viper's bugloss is in glorious bloom along the edge of the track. Its roots were once believed to cure the bite of a viper. I think about Grant. He must be feeling rather hacked off just now: Harry has lost his case to the *Mail* and Liz Hurley may have to rediscover the virtues of holding her dresses together with safety pins following the reported £50 million cost of the action. Truth is, Grant has never had much difficulty dishing it out. It's being on the receiving end that doesn't seem to suit him. Consider this diary my herbal remedy. And my bite back.

The wrong lessons from a murder

Reason, David Hume noted, is a slave of the passions. Arguments, especially political crusades, are often rooted in emotional responses, with the evidence assembled to justify a position which is heartfelt but often wrongheaded.

So it is with the cry, from politicians, for more steps to be taken to safeguard the personal security of politicians. The killing of Ann Widdecombe, like the deaths of Jo Cox and David Amess, has generated new demands for action, and legislation, to protect those in public life from risk and danger. The transparent nobility of Ann's life and the grotesque tragedy of her death make it emotionally difficult to resist the call for strengthened perimeters around our politicians. But someone has to stand out against a tide which, unless resisted, will lead to increased public expenditure, weaker protections for the majority of citizens, further impairment of our democracy and the erosion of basic liberties. So I will.

The case I will make rests on logic. But let me throw some emotion into the mix to start with. For those who will, inevitably, accuse me of insensitivity, I was the prime target for the killer who went on to murder David Amess. The Islamist extremist Ali Harbi Ali hunted me for weeks. He was outside my home, armed with a blade and determined to kill, on six separate occasions. All this only became apparent after David was killed and Ali's phone was in police hands. I grieve for David's family's loss and feel guilt to this day that he was killed because Ali failed to encounter me.

During my political career, my home address was advertised by loyalist paramilitaries as a target, my daughter was sent a birthday card telling her that I would be killed unless I altered government policy, I was set upon by violent anti-vax protestors outside my office, and had to be rescued by police from a 'pro-Palestinian' mob in Victoria Station. So I do know something about the climate of risk in which politicians operate.

Which makes me naturally sympathetic to Nigel Farage's concerns about personal safety and more relaxed than many about his welcoming money from the billionaire Christopher Harborne to provide security. He deserves protection. Which I understand is why he was offered the same level of security as the leader of the opposition. He is at liberty to augment that from private funds. But the case that some of his supporters, and others, have made goes beyond that. Wrongly.

To provide state protection for any individual requires at least ten trained police officers full time. All paid for by you. That's significantly more than half a million pounds per year for each individual protected. How many people can we afford to extend that to? Every MP? Every member of the Scottish and Welsh governments? Every Metro Mayor?

Even with the net drawn as broadly as that – with costs of near to one billion pounds per annum – that would not extend to former politicians with high public profiles and controversial views, such as Ann.

To provide state protection for any individual requires at least ten trained police officers full time

The line has to be drawn somewhere. And it is currently drawn by the security experts of the Home Office team RAVEC, who have access to police and MI5 intelligence on genuine threats. In a world of finite resources, they have to prioritise, and it is better that those with access to real intelligence rather than those fuelled by righteous anger make those decisions.

Our MPs, in any case, do not go unprotected about their work. Parliament is a fortress. They have access to public funds to strengthen the security of their homes. Local police forces are given notice about their public movements and discreet monitoring of any danger points takes place.

Every moment, or pound, of state resource that is allocated to strengthening the already robust protection of politicians is capacity taken away from protecting the rest of us. And there are sections of our society that are under greater constant threat than most MPs – such as the Jewish community.

'Relax, I'm here to make a donation.'

We can keep them, and indeed MPs and all of us, much safer if we tackle the threats to public order and safety at the root. Rather than waiting to beat back the crocodiles when they reach the boat, we can drain the swamp.

That does not mean yet further restrictions on social media. In the aftermath of David Amess's death, and indeed Ann's, much has been said about the need to police public discourse. I'm all in favour of greater civility, in person and online. But David wasn't killed by someone enabled by Elon Musk; he was murdered by an individual driven by Islamist ideology. Using his death, and Ann's, to further restrict open debate would be a defeat for democracy, not a strengthening of its defences.

The two most potent sources of political, and communal, violence are Islamists and the far-right. They provide the worldview, nurture the networks and create the supportive environment for the overwhelming majority of motivated and violent extremists. In government I outlined proposals to combat their work. I also endorsed the excellent study of political violence by the former Labour MP John Woodcock, now Lord Walney.

Those recommendations have lain for the most part neglected. The few which have been taken up, such as the measures against the criminally violent group Palestine Action, have since been denounced, even by sensible voices such as the *Times*. But these are the real threats to public order and safety which can be tackled by effective government action.

By contrast, we can never reduce to zero the threat from mentally unbalanced, or plain evil, individuals bent on destruction. Those on the right, above all, should know that no society can eliminate risk from human life and all attempts to do so inevitably involve escalating taxpayer costs, an extension of state power and the erosion of liberties. So let us grieve for Ann, but let us not see grief become another emotion which drives out reason.

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THE SPECTATOR'S NOTES

Charles Moore

The horrible murder of Ann Widdecombe is being used both by Reform and its critics as a means of fighting about everything they want to fight about. One example is discussion of the security of MPs, despite the fact that Miss Widdecombe left parliament 16 years ago. Is it impossible to wait until charge and trial, as used to be the rule? I suppose the simple answer is 'Yes'. So much the worse for our country.

A virtue-signalling Labour government worried by its own unpopularity also deploys something else, a toughness-signalling intended to placate the insurgent right. Take the case of the 73-year-old Shabir Ahmed, the Rochdale grooming gang leader, recently released from prison. Ministers loudly demand his deportation. Andy Burnham says: 'Like everyone, I want this vile predator out of the country.' The plan is to alter the Immigration Act of 1971 which exempted from deportation those who had arrived before 1973 and had lived at least five years in Britain. Why should this change be made? People, however vile, should not have their rights retrospectively removed. Nor should Pakistan, whence Ahmed came, have to accept him. His actions have nothing to do with his country of origin and he has been here for more than half a century. Besides, the whole thing is fatuous, since Pakistan cannot be forced to take him. No politician seems to be making these obvious points. Presumably none dares do so, for fear of being called soft on paedophiles. Similar bogus toughness was shown in Sir Keir Starmer's sacking of Sir Olly Robbins, head of the Foreign Office. Embarrassed by his own appointment of Lord Mandelson as British ambassador, Sir Keir took it out on Sir Olly for not telling him about Mandelson's lack of security clearance. Yet it had been Starmer, not Robbins, in such haste to get Mandelson in post. The dismissal violated the due process which Starmer loves invoking and ejected a public servant for behaviour which was not iniquitous. Now Sir Olly is seeking a judicial review, and Sir Keir, once our proudest legal eagle, may have his wings clipped. Once again, terror of being soft on paedophilia played its part – the paedo being Mandelson's friend Jeffrey Epstein. In both cases, 'tough' action denotes fear, not courage.

Travelling on the Tube this week, I noticed an advertisement which said: 'Be discreetly extraordinary. Become a sperm donor.' Is this a good way to be discreetly extraordinary? Sperm donation contains definite ethical difficulties. For example, is it right that the children you spawn will not know their father? A traditional way to be discreetly extraordinary in Britain is to join the intelligence services. Now, however, the 'Hillsborough Law', agreed this week, criminalises discretion. It creates a 'duty of candour' which can override the secrecy which intelligence, almost by definition, requires. I suggest that potential sperm donors check whether the duty of candour will apply to them in relation to their children before they go forth and multiply.

My Tube journey was taking me to the commemoration of someone who really was discreetly extraordinary. Ruth Godson, mother of my friend Dean, the director of Policy Exchange, who recently died, aged 98. Ruth escaped Nazi persecution because her father presciently foresaw that the rise of Hitler would doom European Jewry – and duly took her from her native Prague to Palestine in 1933. When Ruth was 16, she secretly joined the Haganah, the Jewish defence group of the British Mandate era. She was being trained by the British authorities who were preparing for the anticipated attack by the Afrika Korps. Ruth did not tell her parents, but was surprised, when attending its gatherings, to find her father there. Neither acknowledged the presence of the other. When the state of Israel was created in 1948, four Arab armies attacked. Ruth was enlisted to procure weapons from the newly communist state of Czechoslovakia, an act which David Ben-Gurion regarded as crucial to the victory. No one knew about this until her old age. For that generation, discretion and extraordinariness went together.

Ruth's first memory of politics was during the 1936 Arab revolt against the Mandate, fuelled by the anti-Semitism of the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem (who later fled to Hitler's Germany). One day, the local Arab handyman brought watermelons as usual. Ruth's mother noticed one had been serrated. Opening it she found a swastika carved inside. The handyman vanished. This was the shape of things to come, including 7 October 2023.

Canon Alistair Macdonald-Radcliff is rector of the famed Anglo-Catholic Advent church in Boston. He recently boarded the *Queen Mary 2*. As he always does when travelling by sea, he asked if he might conduct services of Holy Communion. His request was refused by Cunard, the owners. It now has a land-based bureaucracy, so decisions are no longer made on board. A man entitled the Deputy Entertainment Director told him that he could not hold a service without agreement before boarding – a rule never before mentioned. The *QM2* does have a service conducted by the captain on voyage, but of course no captain can administer the sacraments. The new rule goes against long-standing practice. Strange, since many passengers want Christian services. So do many of the crews. On a previous voyage where, unusually, no Roman Catholic priest was on board, Canon M-R found himself administering the Eucharist to 250, many of whom were Filipinos. 'What sort of sacraments do you want to use?' asked the deputy entertainments manager, as if they were electrical equipment or firearms. In the end, the canon made enough fuss to be granted a room, but it was permitted so late that the ship's bulletin was not able to advertise it. Sad, given the strong tradition of Christian concern 'for those in peril on the sea'.

Burnham begins

The plans for his first ten days

TIM SHIPMAN

Andy Burnham thinks his critics need a new joke about him. The old one about a Blairite, a Brownite and a Corbynite walking into a bar ('Hello, Mr Burnham,' says the barman) is about to be eclipsed. On Monday, it won't be a barman offering good wishes – it will be the Cabinet Secretary, Antonia Romeo, when Burnham walks into No. 10 as Britain's 59th prime minister.

Before that, on Friday, Burnham will accept the leadership of the Labour party, unopposed, at the headquarters of the Trades Union Congress. The speech he will give is still being worked on, but Burnham is 'holding the pen himself', aides say. And one idea he wants to land with his party is the same point he has been making in private over the past week in the corner office in Portcullis House, where the preparations for his premiership are being drawn up. 'I've heard him talk about that joke in the last week,' says one key team member. 'He says, "That joke says more about the people that tell it than it does about me." Because he's not a factional person. He wants a broad church.'

In his acceptance speech, Burnham will acknowledge that Labour has been abandoned by many of its traditional supporters. He will draw on the history of the Labour party, its birth in Wales and the labour movement and formative episodes of its development, in an effort to reconnect his party with the voters it has lost around the country. 'He will talk about the origins of the party and all of these places along the way that made it the movement that it is and then how that links into his views,' says a source familiar with the developing text.

Burnham will repeat what he has told his team in private: 'People didn't move away from the party. The party left them.' One of his team says: 'It's his job as Labour leader, as well as prime minister, to try to transform us back into a party that people feel that they can gravitate towards again.'

That means addressing no-go areas for Labour and a determination to be 'uncompromising' in fighting for votes in areas where Labour has been haemorrhaging support to Reform. He will embark on a tour from 'the back end of August', an aide says. 'He wants to get out into these places in the country where Labour has lost favour with people or that are difficult places for us to go at the moment, and confront those issues head on.'

Unlike Keir Starmer, he intends to win back voters with a positive message, rather than demonising Nigel Farage as a fascist. 'You don't need to sling mud at your opposition,' says a leading figure in the by-election campaign. 'He didn't at any point attack Farage in Makerfield. He is really clear on that, internally as well… We have to sell a message that people want to buy. He did do that in Makerfield.'

There has been no opportunity to quiz incoming ministers. 'It has been vibes heavy and detail light'

To the country, Burnham will offer an apology. 'He thinks politics hasn't been good enough,' an adviser reveals. 'He'll say it's not met the bar of people's expectations, and politicians haven't, and we need to do better.'

Burnham also plans to weaponise his natural optimism, giving voters the impression that 'the cavalry's arrived'. He has learnt from Starmer's first mistake on arrival in Downing Street, peddling doom and gloom which affected economic optimism and growth. 'Andy's got a sense of fairness and hope and optimism in his framing of announcements,' an aide says. 'He's really trying to do things differently from how Keir set off two years ago. The tone needs to be more optimistic while still confronting the very real challenges that are ahead of us.'

So far so good, but also so vague. What does it all amount to? Many in Labour and the civil service remain unsure. Officials complain (very quietly, it should be said) that the access talks between Burnham and Romeo have not gone into the usual level of detail. The prime minister presumptive has only been accompanied by James Purnell, his chief of staff, and Louise Haigh, his closest MP ally. The refusal to announce any cabinet appointments before he visits the King on Monday means there has been no opportunity to quiz incoming ministers on their portfolios. 'It has been vibes heavy and detail light,' says one official.

Those searching for clues on what to expect look at tensions – in policy if not personality – between Josh Simons, the former Labour Together boss who gave up his Makerfield seat for Burnham, and Miatta Fahnbulleh, who is much further to the left – an Ed Miliband ally who has also been doing policy work. 'For the last week Josh has been the main point of contact on policy,' says a ministerial aide who has been prepping the Burnham team. 'Miatta told everyone she had finished her work and submitted it. She seemed annoyed.' Simons has decided not to go into Downing Street as an adviser, preferring to take a break from frontline politics to be with his young family.

Burnham's closest aides argue that this period without a cabinet will increase the coherence of his plan, since what has been discussed is what he wants from each department. 'This will be Andy's programme in a way it was never Keir's programme,' a senior ally says. 'He knows what he wants.'

Friday's speech will repeat his mantra of 'jobs and growth in every postcode' through 'reindustrialisation', but he will also prom-

ise tangible state interventions on the cost-of-living crisis, telling voters he wants to give them 'more breathing room'. One of his moves in the first ten days will be to help the less well off. A move on energy prices, or a tax cut for the lower paid, have both been floated by his camp.

The main policy theme is to devolve power away from London. 'One key line from the speech is the idea that the communities that powered Britain and built Labour have had that power taken away from them by Westminster – and he will return it to them,' a senior figure says.

It remains unclear how much time Burnham is going to spend in Manchester rather than London, but he knows that unless he does so, the plan will not work. 'He recognises that for this to be an actual thing which people take seriously, he is going to have to drive it,' a close ally says. Romeo, the top civil servant, is unlikely to spend much time in Manchester – though when one friend suggested to her that, as a party-loving inhabitant of Zone 1, she was averse to the north, Romeo joked: 'As long as there is a Malmaison, I'll be fine.'

Romeo 'needs politicians to give her the licence to do all the bad shit she wants to do... and then blame them'

Officials see practical problems with Burnham's plan, not least how to transport the new prime minister from one location to another. The protection squad officers who guard the PM will not want him to carry on with the train trips between north and south which have characterised the interregnum. 'Power is where the prime minister is. You can't have the prime minister regularly getting the same scheduled train services,' a former mandarin points out. 'The protection people won't allow it.' The practical alternative would be a helicopter to and fro – though that would hardly endear him to the environmentalists his allies hope to win back from the Green party.

There is also the issue of how secure the new No. 10 North campus is likely to be. 'The Manchester building has no Home Office-grade security and no secure comms,' a Whitehall veteran says. 'It is not the work of an afternoon to fix that.'

Another says: 'It's all becoming a bit too Manchester-focused. Even Lou [Haigh], I think, is quite concerned about that. Practically speaking, MPs have to vote in Westminster, unless you're just not whipping anything and it becomes some sort of Manchester-based hippie free-for-all festival.'

Caroline Simpson, the chief executive of the Greater Manchester Authority, is expected to become the chief civil service point person for No. 10 North, but the identity of the main political figure based in Manchester will be crucial. A Labour strategist says: 'The key decisions are: who is chancellor and who is the Manchester political lead, because that is basically the person who's going to run the general election… Labour needs to win seats in the Midlands and north-west, so you base your political operation there.'

One of those who could play a role there is Nathan Yeowell, an ally of Starmer's chief aide Morgan McSweeney, who worked with Purnell and Helen MacNamara, the former deputy cabinet secretary, on a report last year for the Future Governance Forum, which recommended a beefed-up Prime Minister's Department at the heart of Whitehall, something Purnell is expected to pursue.

Romeo, whom Burnham's team think is 'very impressive', is also keen to use the change of regime to make it easier to sack failing civil servants and pay the best ones more. 'She wants to be able to pay younger talents more by giving them more salary than pension. She also wants to reduce headcount so she can give more to the best people. She needs politicians to give her the licence to do all the bad shit she wants to do to her own civil service and then blame them,' says one Whitehall cynic.

The decision of Olly Robbins, the former permanent secretary at the Foreign Office, to seek a judicial review over Starmer's decision to sack him has thrown a spanner in the works. Not only would a hearing force the government into making embarrassing disclosures; experts say that if Robbins won, that would 'effectively make perm secs unsackable by the back door'. A senior official says: 'If Antonia wants to sack anybody, and she 100 per cent has a list, she needs to not let this [review] continue.' That makes it more, not less, likely that Robbins will be offered a senior job by Burnham.

Key figures from Starmer's No. 10 are also expected to stay, including Jonathan Powell, the national security adviser, and Varun Chandra, the head of business outreach. Parna Taylor, a former employee of Purnell's, has been helping him 'sift the CVs' of incoming staff. Danny Coyne, a former special adviser to John Healey who has been advising Burnham for months, has emerged as a player in the policy arena, as has Graeme Cooke, who also used to work for Purnell.

Sarah Brown, Sadiq Khan's director of communications, is planning a shakeup of

Signature

Rather than who were picking up
the big bonuses, it was his signature
I'd look for when signing for my wages.
Just another bloke on the gang,
no particular accent or hairstyle,
but his handwriting – in fountain pen,
not the Sellotape-bound biro
dangling from the clipboard –
wouldn't have been out of place
in a shipping company's ledger
or even a Book of Hours.

–Philip Hancock

government comms, which will see her run an empire encompassing both media and message delivery. Grace Pritchard, who ran communications for Burnham in Makerfield, is likely to become 'director of new news'.

Whatever the details of Burnham's policy blitz, what really matters is his approach to the economy – where he wants to borrow more to invest and raise taxes on wealth. (Insiders are clear that will be the case, regardless of who runs the Treasury.)

By lunchtime on Tuesday, *The Spectator* was hearing the same noises from the Burnham camp that were later reported by the *Times* that Shabana Mahmood, rather than Ed Miliband, was set to become Burnham's chancellor. Even quite left-wing members of his team, such as Haigh, had voiced doubts about Miliband's appointment, on the grounds that it would unnerve the markets and get in the way of opening up North Sea fossil fuel extraction.

However, those in the know caution against seeing a Mahmood appointment as a victory for the Labour right. 'Slightly depressingly,' a senior female civil servant says, 'the decision seems to be because she's a woman. They've got to the right answer but for the wrong reasons.'

'Up until now, Burnham's magic power has been no choices, no trade-offs. You have it all'

One source who has been close to the transition planning said that if Mahmood becomes chancellor, it opens the door to Miliband as home secretary, though the former defence secretary John Healey has also been mentioned. More intriguing still, for Kremlinologists of the Miliband family psychodrama, one Labour source says: 'They want Shabana for chancellor, but Ed could become foreign secretary.' Foreign secretary, however, is the job coveted by David Miliband, who was vanquished by his younger brother in the 2010 leadership contest and who has made no secret of his desire to return to frontline politics. The same source says that David Miliband has 'made clear that he really wants it', through intermediaries and at least one direct conversation with Purnell, an old friend of his.

One important figure in Burnham world, asked what chance there is of Mahmood going to the Treasury and Ed Miliband to the Foreign Office, says: 'Seven out of ten, but I know Andy – and only he, and maybe Lou, will know for sure.'

The two roles which insiders say are nailed down are those that have been lined up for the two most important women in Burnham's campaign team. Haigh, the former transport secretary, is expected to become Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster ('CDL' in Whitehall-speak), effectively replacing Darren Jones as the prime minister's cabinet consigliere. 'Lou kicks ass and gets things done' is the verdict expressed by a ministerial aide who is not of her politics. That is the generally held view.

Anneliese Midgley, the MP for Knowsley and former political director of Unite, is expected to become chief whip. Burnham is openly dismissive of the traditional culture of whipping, with its threats and inducements. 'My aim is to create a team and culture where everyone is valued, seen, listened to and can make their mark and make a difference for their constituents,' he recently wrote to all Labour MPs – a message he repeated when he addressed the Parliamentary Labour party on Monday evening.

Midgley is a canny operator, but this approach is likely to be tested immediately with early votes on Mahmood's crackdown on migration, which has already been watered down to reduce the ten years she wanted new arrivals to spend in Britain before they get indefinite leave to remain.

These are strange times for Burnham. The Hillsborough Law, which he advocated for, was passed by the Commons earlier this week, creating the duty of candour in public servants. On Wednesday, he was in Wales for his daughter's graduation. That same morning he went running with Mo Farah, the Olympic gold medallist. 'He's been going on a run every day,' a friend notes. 'It helps him clear his head and gives him space to think. He'd like to keep that up. He did it throughout the by-election. It sets up his day.'

Like Mo Farah, Burnham has timed his run to perfection. After learning the lessons from two failed leadership bids, he has sent Starmer packing without most of the angst and psychodrama that have characterised changes of Conservative prime ministers over the past decade.

Yet no one, probably not even Burnham himself, knows what he will be like in the hot seat. Bill Clinton was once asked whether he was ready to be president and replied: 'No one is ever ready to be president.' A Labourite observes: 'Up until now, Burnham's magic power has been no choices, no trade-offs. You have it all. The question is whether we're going to do trade-offs like grown-ups or whether we're going to do Keir Starmer, ditto, repeat.'

Going back to that old joke, Burnham's economics will have a whiff of Corbyn, but the real question is whether he will resemble Blair or Brown more. At the summer reception for the Tony Blair Institute, Blair offered Burnham advice, saying he should not try to be loved.

A New Labour cabinet minister was present who voiced the fears that some harbour: 'Andy, like Gordon, got the job with no contest, and everyone was hopeful, but Gordon could never decide if he was continuity or change. Can Andy?'

In a week's time we'll have a better idea.

BAROMETER

Dying of heat

Have this year's heatwaves really killed **2,700** people? The claim has been made in a paper by Imperial College.
– The figure was arrived at by taking the temperature recordings and modelling the theoretical number of deaths based on past heatwave events. However, actual data on deaths tells a different story. The UK Health Security Agency, which measures recorded deaths against a five-year average, declares there was 'no signal of high mortality above the baseline' for the week ending 31 May, the first heatwave this year.
– As for the second heatwave, provisional data shows there were **768** fewer deaths (or **7.4%**) than would have been expected from the five-year average. The later figures might yet be revised upwards.

Offender numbers

How many foreign national offenders are returned to their home countries?
– In the year ending March 2026, **5,858** were deported, following a steady increase from the **2,706** deported in 2021 but still down on the peak of **6,437** in 2016. The most common countries for return were:

Albania	**1,557**	Portugal	**163**
Romania	**1,013**	Vietnam	**118**
Poland	**493**	Brazil	**112**
Lithuania	**331**	Netherlands	**111**
Bulgaria	**179**	India	**103**

Source: Home Office

Animal testing

Which animals get experimented upon?
– In 2025, there were **2.54m** scientific procedures involving animals, down from **2.64m** in 2024. **1.32m** were straightforward experiments for medical trials or other purposes: **56%** involved mice, **16%** involved fish, **10%** involved birds, **9%** involved rats and **1%** involved cats, dogs, horses or primates. **1.22m** cases involved genetic alteration: of these, **85%** involved mice, **14%** fish and **0.5%** rats and birds.
Source: Home Office

Designated terrorism

A man suspected of murdering Ann Widdecombe, the former Conservative minister, was arrested on terrorism charges. How many arrests for terrorism are there?
– In 2025, there were **3,034** arrests, compared with **250** in the whole of 2024. However, **2,779** of these related to membership of Palestine Action, a group only designated a terrorist organisation in July 2025. If you subtract these, there were **255** terrorism arrests in 2025. As of 31 March 2026, **486** of the **3,034** arrests had resulted in terrorism charges. Of these, **412** related to Palestine Action and **74** to others.

DOUGLAS MURRAY

Two-tier mourning

I don't know if you remember that old saw: 'Always speak ill of the dead.' I don't recall being brought up with it myself, but a number of our fellow countrymen apparently were. After the brutal killing of Ann Widdecombe last week we saw some fine examples of people following this rule.

Peter Tatchell – a prominent member of the 'be kind' brigade – took to social media to describe the death of Widdecombe in celebratory tones. He listed her crimes, such as her belief that marriage is a union between a man and a woman, and then ended his tweet by saying: 'BIGOT!' As though final judgment had been passed down from on high.

Adam Boulton of Sky News made a similarly crass intervention, summing up the former MP and MEP's career mainly by reference to her private life. It was an odd performance from Boulton, who seemed interested not in any of Widdecombe's very significant political accomplishments, but by the fact that she was an 'old maid', a 'spinster' and a 'virgin'. Since Boulton doesn't mind speaking so disrespectfully of the dead, perhaps I might respond in kind about the living, by pointing out that he would probably have made a number of women happier if he had remained a virgin himself.

To be fair, both Tatchell and Boulton soon apologised for and retracted their comments after the full horror of Widdecombe's final moments became clear. But their responses, and those from other figures, point to a number of considerable imbalances in our public life.

The first is the reminder that once again it seems possible to say anything you like about somebody, whether they are living or dead, if they happen to be right-wing. Widdecombe was a serious, principled, lifelong conservative. Her deeply held religious and political views should have been to her credit. She was, according to everyone who knew her or met her, unfailingly courteous and kind in person. But such considerations can be dismissed if you haven't spent your life advancing 'progressive' views.

Then there is the rule that a death must not be 'politicised' if it occurs on the political right. In a little more than a decade there have been two murders of MPs: Jo Cox and Sir David Amess. In the case of Jo Cox, I do not recall the Labour party, the Remain campaign or her closest friends in parliament avoiding the politicisation of her appalling murder. Indeed, there was a moment when everybody intending to vote Brexit was made to feel almost personally responsible for her death at the hands of a lone madman.

With Sir David it was a different story. As I have noted here before, the fact that the Conservative MP was hacked to death by an Islamist while holding a constituency surgery was completely avoided in the parliamentary debate which resulted. Everyone was warned that we might prejudice the trial if we mentioned the identity of his attacker.

It seems possible to say anything you like about somebody, living or dead, if they happen to be right-wing

We were told that the day to discuss the killer's motivations would come after the trial. But that day never did come. Sir David's murder never was 'politicised'. Indeed it seems to have been memory-holed.

Now the same people who intently politicised Cox's murder are warning Nigel Farage and members of Reform, to which Widdecombe latterly belonged, against making any political point about her killing. Perhaps, as with Sir David, we will be expected simply to regard it as one of those freak occurrences from which no broader message must ever be taken.

Which brings me to the sudden and late eruption of graciousness since the barbaric nature of Widdecombe's end became known. Television and radio presenters from across the political spectrum have come out to say what a kind and principled woman she was. Even some political opponents have paid tribute to her.

It has been strange to watch the transformation of the discourse as the week has progressed. There are perhaps several reasons behind it. Some initial guilt. An understandable horror as the facts have emerged. Most of all the reminder that people whose politics we disagree with need not be cast as enemies but rather simply as people with whom we disagree.

Something similar has played out across the pond. The sudden death of Senator Lindsey Graham at the age of 71 has brought tributes not just from Republicans but also from the Democrats with whom he worked. Why should they have taken so long to be nice about him? The same thing also occurred when Graham's friend John McCain died. Only once he was safely dead was McCain lauded by his political opponents as the epitome of the bipartisan spirit in the Senate. People from across the aisle told stories of the decency of the man, and the way he reached out to them and befriended them, despite their differing political persuasions.

It used to be said that the difference between American and British politics was that in Britain, MPs were rude to each other's faces in the chamber and strangely friendly to each other in private. Whereas in America, senators and congressmen were always polite to each other's faces and utterly vicious behind their backs. Of the two, the British tradition was vaguely preferable.

In recent decades we seem to have reached a point in both countries where our representatives are both rude to each other's faces and unfriendly in private. The manner in which Ed Davey and others are able to speak about the Reform party's MPs does not suggest some joshing disagreement on policies. They seem to hate them and everything they stand for. Not for the first time, the thought occurs that to be truly vicious and evil you have to believe that you are on the side of the angels. Or 'progress', as it is also now called.

SPECTATOR.COM/DOUGLASMURRAY
The debate continues online.

Smooth sailing

Christopher Nolan's Odyssey is a triumph

JON HARVEY

Incredible stories, otherworldly creatures, false identities, a cavalcade of trickery: the original *Odyssey* is packed with everything you could want from a big-screen blockbuster. And like all great stories, it's more than just a fantasy adventure. It's about survival, marriage, truth, what it means to be a man and much more. It's also roughly 2,700 years old, and by picking it for his latest movie, Sir Christopher Nolan has definitively proved that the old ones are the best. But why, really, has he decided to go Greek?

Screenwriters have always been suckers for a good 'coming home' story. It was such a popular genre in ancient times that the Greeks even coined a name for it: '*nostos*'. If you throw in their word for pain ('*algos*') you get 'nostalgia', and on that note modern pop culture is littered with many a *nostos*. *Star Trek IV* is literally subtitled *The Voyage Home*, while hit 1980s-1990s TV show *Quantum Leap* sees physicist Sam Beckett (Scott Bakula) forced to inhabit a different person's body in every episode, 'hoping each time his next leap will be the leap home'. Film nerds have worked out that if you combine *The Odyssey*, *The Martian*, *Interstellar* and *Saving Private Ryan*, Hollywood has spent more than $600 million bringing Matt Damon home.

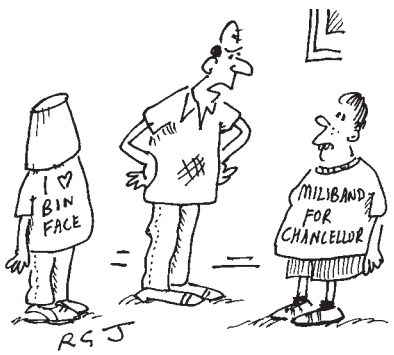
As satisfying as a good *nostos* is, that can't be the only reason Nolan has decided to tackle Homer (whoever he/they may have been, but that's another story). If you look at the director's back catalogue, his films are obsessed with narrative trickery: *Memento* unfolds backwards, *Dunkirk* jumps between three different timescales, *Inception* is/isn't all a dream, and *Tenet* is so complex it feels as if it confused Nolan himself. This slipperiness is the secret sauce of Homer's *Odyssey*. The poem's narrative leaps about more wildly than a sea nymph, dripping with flashbacks, simultaneous action across multiple locations and giant switches in viewpoint. It's astonishingly sophisticated, and the overall effect is to make you unsure who and what you can believe. Which brings us to our eponymous hero.

You'd think Odysseus would be catnip to Nolan, because he has peppered tricksters throughout his earlier films. When the Joker (Heath Ledger) in *The Dark Knight* tells contradictory stories about how he got his facial scars, he's mirroring the King of Ithaca, who offers multiple explanations for why he was away for so long. Did he spend seven years beached with the nymph Calypso, or was he over in Egypt getting filthy rich? It depends who's listening. What's more, while we're told that Odysseus has had enough of Calypso and he's now eager to go home to his wife and son, it's never stated objectively in the poem whether he's always been quite such a reluctant receiver of a divine being's nightly sexual attention. It's entirely plausible – maybe probable – that Odysseus has had lots of fun and only now as we join the story has he got bored.

Perhaps hamstrung by modern sensibilities, Nolan doesn't run with this. Instead he absolves his Odysseus of blame, and has him gradually remember his wanderings to Calypso as she weans him off the amnesia-inducing lotus flowers she's been feeding him to help him forget his past. (This is a conflation with another episode in the poem.) You could call it a cop-out or a massaging of the hero's character to make him more palatable for modern eyes. It works either way, as does the speeding-up of Circe's role from a year's dalliance to a fleeting visit. That scene, by the way, deserves to go down in history for Samantha Morton's breathtaking, horrifying performance.

Remember, Odysseus is the bloke who invented the Trojan Horse, so he knows a good trick or two

What about Odysseus's other incredible adventures? There's no argument about the Cyclops episode, but the Sirens, Scylla and Charybdis, the Laestrygonian cannibal giants and more only ever come to us through the hero's own mouth. Remember, this is the bloke who invented the Trojan Horse, so he knows a good trick or two. And he's got a reason (like Penelope) to spin us a yarn. In the poem he tells these tall tales at dinner to the court of the Phaeacians, who have a special fast self-driving ship that can take Odysseus home, if they decide they like him. Luckily they do, and it's thanks to them that our hero finally reaches Ithaca.



'Honestly Kevin, can't you adopt more rational politics like your brother?'

This doesn't mean that Odysseus made the whole thing up. But we're wise to take it all with a pinch of Mediterranean salt. The point is he has a skill at telling the right story to the right person at the right time. In the era of fake news, he should be the perfect hero. One of the Greek adjectives used to describe him – which classicists love to argue about – is '*polutropos*'. It's best translated as 'a man of many turns', which preserves the ambiguity over who or what is doing the turning: is it the ever-turbulent world or our hero's own devious mind?

Given what he had to play with, Nolan's film is far less tricksy than we might have expected. He seems more interested in themes of civilisational collapse, and whether we need to consider our own role in that, than in pulling the wool over our eyes. The irony is that his 2006 movie *The Prestige*, about a pair of quarrelling magicians (Christian Bale and Hugh Jackman) is in spirit arguably more Odyssean than his *Odyssey*.

Even so, the new film astutely threads the needle between the real world and the supernatural right from the first frame, which is a caption that reads, somewhat ambiguously, 'In a time of apparent magic'. This echoes another trick buried in the original Greek called 'double determination', which means the plot can be simultaneously explained either by divine intervention or without the gods pulling the strings. Does Poseidon whip up a terrible storm, or is it just bad weather? It's the ancient equivalent of *Inception*'s spinning top: you can read it either way.

Gladiator may have captured ancient Rome, but nothing on the big screen had ever quite done justice to the timeless and extraordinary stories of Greek mythology until now. Yes he's taken liberties, and no he's not Homer. But Nolan is a master storyteller who's embarked on a colossal journey and pulled it off, which makes him nothing short of a cinematic Odysseus. There's no higher praise than that. Or is there? It depends who's talking.

Jon Harvey is Count Binface.

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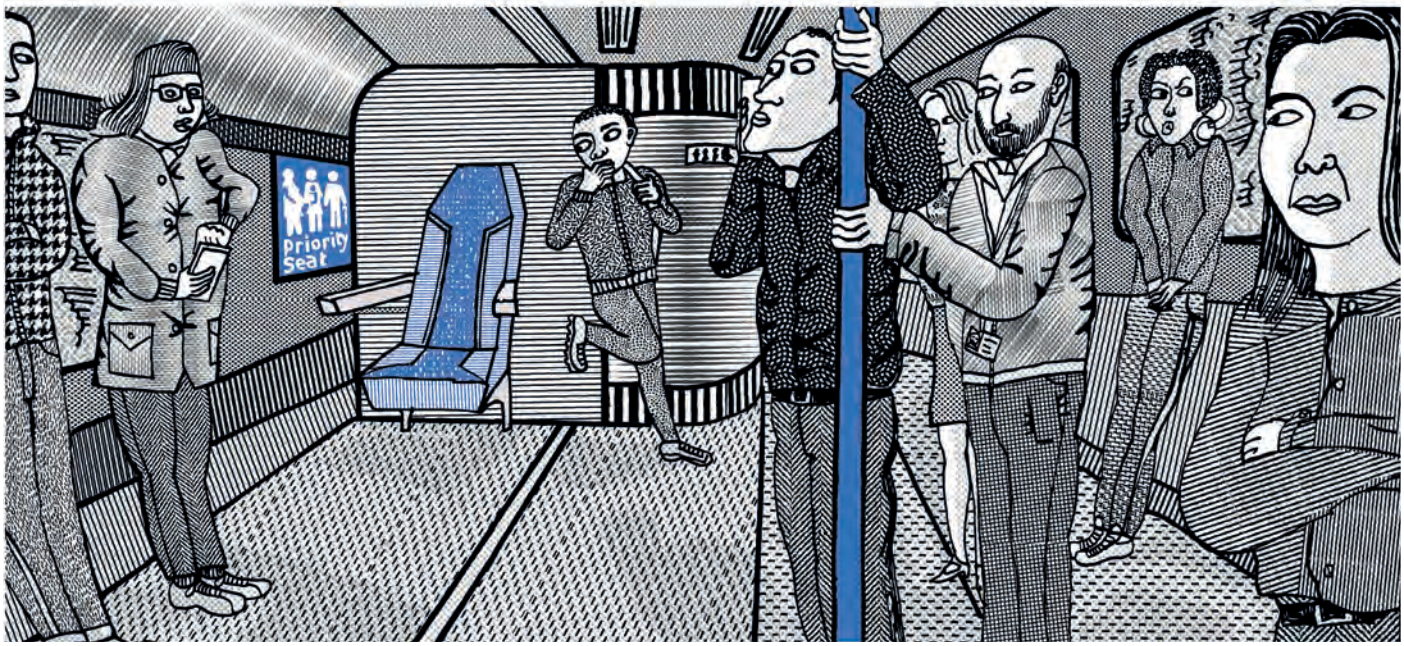
Sick of it

Disability should not be aspirational

MICHAEL SIMMONS



JOHN BROADLEY

Britain is crippled. More of us than ever before are disabled. One in four, at the last count. But it is a statistic so obviously at odds with reality that anyone with working eyesight should question it. Instead, it has been adopted as fact by government, doctors, charities and benefits assessors.

This mass collapse in health – nearly four million more people describing themselves as disabled in the past decade – is driven, we are told, by genuinely worsening mental health and a surge in diagnoses of conditions such as ADHD and autism. So vast is the problem that a government review last week found the sickness-welfare system 'not fit for purpose'. No wonder, when the number of working-age Britons claiming disability benefits is rising faster than the estimated disabled population itself.

I just don't believe all these people really are disabled. The word itself has lost all meaning, and I should know.

A declaration of interest: I am a spastic. I have cerebral palsy – left hemiparesis, to be exact – and, unlike many 'disabled' people today, I'd much rather I didn't. I am lucky. As an adult, it causes me relatively little trouble, beyond a strong aversion to standing up for too long. But my childhood was spent wearing a splint and undergoing medical procedures, some of which are now considered so barbaric that they are no longer carried out by the NHS.

My condition also brought with it what I fondly misremember as playground high jinks: shouts of 'pegleg' and 'Spazzy McGee', and classmates hiding my splint in the roof void when I took it off for swimming lessons.

But leave the character-building aside and what really upset me was not the pain. It was the determination of every adult around me to make me accept the label 'disabled' when I – desperately, above all – wanted to be normal and judged on the same terms as anyone else.

'Michael,' my NHS physiotherapist would say, 'you qualify for a free travel pass and leisure centre membership. Why won't you sign up?' I was so stubborn in my refusal to accept help from 'Support for Learning' that it repeatedly tipped into belligerence and landed me in detention. I rejected 'balance class', extra time in exams and, later, disability-access schemes when applying to university or for my first job. The idea of any sort of leg up (forgive me) was offensive to my pride.

My instinct to reject the disability label spurred me on, and it must have saved the taxpayer a few bob

My instinct to reject the disability label, I think, paid dividends. It spurred me on to moderate success, and it must have saved the taxpayer a few bob too. But I'm not deluded; I'm aware I was only a product of the environment at the time, in which labels were to be shunned.

Since then, things have changed. Labels have become cool. Were I at school today, I suspect I would have embraced the disabled badge. I'd certainly have felt cool on crutches. In Scotland, where I grew up, nearly half of pupils now qualify for additional support. They are the new in-crowd.

Indeed, I witnessed this new institutional attitude to disability when lightning struck again in my early twenties and I was diagnosed with a spinal cord tumour. 'You're very unlucky to get this on top of your CP,' observed my thankfully on-the-spectrum neurosurgeon. My immediate challenge was survival; the next was avoiding being disabled by the NHS.

When I woke up from the surgery I had to remain flat for the first few days. That sent some tests skew-whiff and led the young registrar to matter-of-factly declare: 'I think we have paralysed you. But don't worry, we'll be back in a few days to fit you with a catheter and an erection pump.' I responded rationally by battering the dose button on my self-administered morphine.

Thankfully, this agony was quickly broken by the consultant, who came breathlessly bounding into the ward, having seen the notes, to tell me the registrar was talking nonsense and I was most certainly not paralysed. He also dismissed as 'defeat-

ist rubbish' a standard NHS leaflet that I'd been given which stated that the majority of spinal patients never return to work. Months of gradually starting to walk again and an opioid withdrawal programme followed, as, again: 'Most people who have taken the amount of opioids you have never come off them.'

Finding myself in the hands of this particular surgeon was lucky because he pushed back against all the systemic incentives that now seem to be dragging society towards disability and dependency. He shared my worldview. Now, perhaps our Presbyterian

Recorded autism diagnoses are up roughly 640 per cent; ADHD diagnoses up nearly 1,600 per cent

approach to disability – that it is something to overcome and disguise rather than celebrate and display – is unhealthy. But today's instinct is surely worse. Disability is in vogue. Diagnosis has become identity.

That cultural change – which I am so lucky to have avoided – is plain in the data. The Family Resources Survey – the source of the one-in-four statistic – shows most of the newly crippled are young people. Break the figures down by age and the pattern is alarming: among 16- to 24-year-olds, the disabled proportion has nearly doubled over the last ten years. Among the over-65s – the group in which age-related disability should, if anything, be climbing – the rate has actually fallen a little.

Yet the rise is overwhelmingly driven largely by mental-health and neurodevelopmental conditions. Other data shows that the traditional categories – multiple sclerosis, cerebral palsy, serious physical disability – have barely moved. The boom is taking place at the softer, more subjective end of the definition.

Another review, commissioned by Wes Streeting before he resigned as health secretary, has already published its interim findings, with the final report due out soon. Its conclusions will be, I am told, 'terrifying'. Rather than relying on the easily manipulated and flawed surveys favoured by campaign groups and trade unions, it will draw on decades of population data. It will finally, I hope, force ministers to confront the possibility of widespread overdiagnosis.

But to do that, it must confront the standard defence: that doctors are merely catching up on generations of missed cases. Diagnosis should slow as it catches up with true prevalence. Leukaemia, diagnosed by blood test rather than clinical judgment, has barely changed since 2000; recorded autism diagnoses are up roughly 640 per cent, and ADHD nearly 1,600 per cent. Categories without a hard biological test can evidently expand far faster. Demand is accelerating too: waiting lists for ADHD and autism assessments have risen fifteen-fold since 2020, compared with a doubling across general mental-health services. One senior clinician believes that, if diagnosis rates have not already overtaken true prevalence, they soon will.

Diagnostic fashion has plainly played a part. The folding, 13 years ago, of autism's various subtypes into a single 'spectrum', which ranges from kids we might have described as 'bookish' to those completely unable to function, has mechanically inflated the counts. Children whom we would have classed as having conduct disorder started to be moved to the more popular ADHD category. Uta Frith, who pioneered the expanded autism category, even admits the new definition has become so wide that it has 'lost all meaning' and was a mistake.

The blame does not lie solely with doctors. Diagnosis carries powerful institutional, financial and cultural incentives. Whereas parents once wanted there to be nothing wrong with their child, now they find that a neurodevelopmental label can be the only reliable gateway to school support. Around that need has grown a private assessment industry with an obvious interest in finding something to diagnose. The geography of certain conditions should make us curious: unlike with depression, anxiety, schizophrenia or self-harm, ADHD's recorded prevalence has shifted from deprived towards affluent postcodes, increasingly following money and parental pushiness. Meanwhile, the line between serious impairment, ordinary difficulty and individual eccentricity has blurred almost beyond recognition – and the rest of us dare not question it.

We live in a society in which disabled people must be described as merely 'differently abled', while apparently requiring more state support than ever before. It is a society in which autism is idiotically advertised as a 'superpower' – a slogan particularly galling for those families caring for people who cannot speak or live independently.

Doctors know this but few speak out. Many privately describe the visible 'exhilaration' on the faces of patients they have just diagnosed with in-vogue conditions such as ADHD. They're gobsmacked when they see the same patients announce the news on social media as though they've won the Lottery rather than received confirmation of a lifelong disorder.

Increasingly it seems the label is the cure,

with the diagnosis becoming a total explanation of the self, a means of medicalising eccentricity or explaining away bad behaviour. Don't take my word for it, it's in the data. Prescriptions for amphetamines – a pretty effective treatment for ADHD – have not kept pace with the diagnostic boom, which shows that once they've got their desired label, many patients don't want to bother with any treatment.

There are costs and consequences to all this. Britain already spends more on health and disability benefits than on defence (£83 billion vs £63 billion) and the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) expects the gap to widen. Once a disability label has been gained, it removes the expectation that the unemployed should seek work and turns what would otherwise be pretty miserly benefits into extremely generous ones.

The label also allows schools to tolerate persistent absence – probably the worst outcome for a mentally unwell child. In fact, add in the disability category to our economic outlook and the problems seem far worse: nearly half of all NEET (not in education, employment or training) young people are now classed as disabled – more than double the rate in 2011 – and the single biggest reason they give is their mental health.

Defenders of the status quo point out that welfare spending has barely moved as a share of GDP. But that stable headline conceals a crippling shift from temporary unemployment support towards long-term exclusion from the workforce. Nor does the benefits bill capture the full cost: people classified as disabled may disappear from the unemployment statistics, but not from the taxpayer's bill. The OBR estimates that a 1.5-point health-driv-

The line between serious impairment, ordinary difficulty and eccentricity has blurred beyond recognition

en fall in labour-force participation would add 0.5 per cent of GDP to welfare spending while cutting income-tax and national insurance receipts by another 0.4 per cent.

Labels matter. I was very fortunate to encounter professionals who expected me to recover, work and live rather than organise my life around incapacity. Such people are now scarce. A compassionate state should generously support those who have profound disabilities. But the rest of us – those whose physical or mental conditions hold us back only a little – should at least ask whether we are meaningfully disabled, or whether we would be better served by shutting up and getting on with living.

The data is, after all, pretty clear: most of those queuing for a label may not need any medical intervention at all. Compassion does not require us to turn every difficulty into a disability, or every eccentricity into a disorder.

Soul sisters

Are you enjoying a 'nun girl summer'?

MARGARET MITCHELL

The nuns were wrapping up their night prayer when I entered the chapel at Tyburn Convent. I couldn't see them but heard their soft voices singing the last phrases of the 'Salve Regina': 'O clement, O loving, O sweet Virgin Mary.' Across the road in Hyde Park, an outdoor concert heaved. What was I doing, spending my Friday night here instead?

I had come to see if the rumours of a 'nun girl summer', as it's being called on TikTok, were true. Earlier this year, a video of two nuns discussing their ultimate frisbee skills went viral: 'Sister, you are so good at that!' 'Sister Miriam, you also are!' As the pair record an episode of the podcast *Dominican Sisters Open Mic*, they're filled with the kind of blissed-out giggly joy you really only see in nuns and people on edibles. I then heard stories about young women moving into convents, and of silent monastic retreats getting booked up months in advance. Bibles are said to be flying off the shelves, with record sales in both the US and UK last year.

As I might have expected, the Tyburn chapel was half-filled with little old stockinged ladies and their inexplicable number of shopping bags ('We're small in numbers so we'll all have to sing a bit louder this time,' the usher said). But even if the 'nun girl summer' trend has not resulted in overflowing pews or more women taking the veil, it points to a spiritual ache among young women that is real. Nuns, we hope, can offer some guidance.

When I hear my friends talk about having a 'celibacy era', they sound more relieved than repressed. Dating apps, for one thing, have made love feel like a humiliation ritual. A vow of chastity might not be that bad after all. Housing is also a demoralising necessity, whether you're trying to buy or facing the expensive and brutal rental market. Boarding in a convent is a clean, quiet and, importantly, cheap alternative, as long as you can put up with chores and a curfew.

The distinctly female life of a nun also appeals. As 'female-only spaces' – or any solid notion of femininity – have become politically fraught, I think young women have lost the confidence to acknowledge that uniquely feminine virtues exist and should be celebrated. Nuns are not all clement, loving and sweet, but their small society allows them to flourish as women. While the rest of us are encouraged to develop as citizens or employees, that crucial part of our nature is often neglected. No wonder we might crave a bit of sisterhood.

However, your late teens and twenties are supposedly a time to see the world, live hedonistically and have 'hot girl summers'. Is the convent really such an ideal place to spend our formative years? I think of Pansy Osmond in *The Portrait of a Lady*, who is raised in a convent and becomes, to her manipulative father's delight, 'a passive spectator of the operation of her fate'; or the tragic heroine of Maupassant's *Une vie*, whose ignorance of the world, thanks to her education in a convent, is the source of her miseries. How many convent schoolgirls leave complaining of 'Catholic guilt' and other nun-induced neuroses? Weren't nuns meant to be knuckle-rapping, mean old biddies?

When I hear my friends talk about having a 'celibacy era', they sound more relieved than repressed

'Nun girl summer' is partly an outcome of the nunnery's revamp over the past decade or so. Under Pope Francis, religious sisters saw an expansion of their role in the Catholic Church. He appointed sisters to leadership roles in the Roman Curia and allowed women to vote in the Synod of Bishops, which convenes to advise the Pope. In the popular imagination, nuns are quietly crusading feminists changing the Church from within – as depicted by Isabella Rossellini's character in *Conclave*, Sister Agnes, who steers the election of the new pope despite not having a formal vote. The reality is perhaps less exciting, but more beautiful. I recently spotted a pile of prayer cards at church with a beaming photograph of Sister Clare Crockett, who died at 33 in an earthquake in 2016. She looks as if she might host a podcast, and is also on her way to being recognised as a saint.

When I was a teenager in the Francis years, just about every one of my female friends went through a nun-curious phase. We went to girls-only prayer retreats with religious sisters, spending silent hours in Ignatian contemplation. A week of our summer holidays was spent at a co-ed Catholic overnight camp, where young women in habits ran through fields like Maria von Trapp in the Alps, chasing frisbees.

When the campers gathered for evening prayer, a priest would ask that anyone who felt 'called to a religious vocation' – Catholic lingo for wanting to become a priest or a nun – come forward for a blessing. I often did – though it was partially an attempt to impress the handsome young seminarians there. It was also a kind of teenage radicalism. I told one theology teacher that I would gladly renounce society for the uncomplicated life of a nun. He said that if I was running to the convent to escape the world, I would still find myself unhappy there. I knew he was right.

Others were more serious about it than I was. A few years ago, my childhood best friend told her then-boyfriend that she wanted to explore other options before getting married. For her, this meant spending time with some nuns, mulling over whether to devote her life to Christ (I imagine it's terrifying to contend with a literally flawless man for your lady's heart). But 'nun girl summers' must come to an end, and they decided to marry after all.

The question of my vocation was, thankfully, more straightforward. I got engaged (in Vatican City, funnily enough). The following day, I watched as a group of nuns slowly climbed Rome's Scala Sancta on their knees, praying. I found that I envied their grey anonymity and self-effacing devotion, even though I had been called to a different vocation, that of marriage. My flirtation with the religious life was only ever half-hearted, but I suppose even a summer fling can stay with you a long time.

LIONEL SHRIVER

Bring back the nasty party

In the 2024 American and British national elections, it was no mystery why the incumbents lost. Both the Democratic and Conservative parties had abandoned their core principles. Democrats veered so far left that they fell off the edge of the world. Tories squandered 14 years in power competing with the sopping opposition over who could be more wet, a strategy perfectly designed to alienate the entire electorate. Left-wing voters will not – surprise – vote 'Conservative'. Conservative voters want – surprise – conservative representatives and instead got sheep in sheep's clothing.

Although I'm seldom keen on purity tests, Kemi Badenoch now heads a party that resembles Britain's sewage-mucked rivers, and it could use some purifying. So I welcome her announcement that she will weed out from the next list of Tory parliamentary candidates anyone who still backs net zero and who doesn't support withdrawal from the ECHR. The Tories will field candidates all united firmly around the same pragmatic right-of-centre message.

Conservative softies in the pressure group Prosper UK object to such opinion vetting, claiming that the party must remain a 'broad church'. Yet 'broad' positions that are all over the map fail to offer voters clear answers to their country's difficulties. Further, a party is not a church. Governing as if running a Presbyterian charity bake sale was the Tories' problem.

Conservatives might seem to have fallen prey to Gad Saad's 'suicidal empathy', but their weakness has been more superficial than feeling too deeply for their fellow man. Tories have desperately wanted to seem nice. They've wanted to be liked. They've been suckers for any policy that casts them as caring – as concerned for the 'vulnerable' (never mind that governmental altruism requires a functional economy) and making the whole world (as opposed to Britain) a better place.

If Britain's oldest political party is ever to restore its reputation for competence and fiscal responsibility, it must also restore its reputation as the nasty party. It must relinquish this forlorn hope of being loved, accepting the risk of dislike in trade for the citizenry's begrudging trust. It must advocate for a platform that seems harsh. It must be willing to make some people unhappy for the sake of the country at large – thereby, in the fullness of time, making more people happy than not. The Tories must become hard-asses, or they'll not return to government. Which could make them lucky. For if the UK isn't soon wrested forcefully from its current pushover benevolence towards every interest group save 'the rich', a parliamentary majority will merely provide front-row seats for the sickening spectacle of national collapse.

So, yes, bin net zero. Curtail public subsidies for renewables that prop up the fiction that windmills save families money, halt the paving of productive farmland with solar panels manufactured with coal in China, and resume drilling in the North Sea – because the UK's deindustrialisation and popular penury have no effect on the weather. And, yes, quit the ECHR, ditto the Refugee Convention and any other treaty or legislation that protects murderers, rapists, thieves and fraudsters from deportation. While you're at it, Kemi, stop putting young men who break into your country in hotels or any other agreeable accommodation, stop giving them phones, stipends and free dental care and start stuffing them in detention facilities, which they can tell all their friends in Calais are unpleasant.

The Tories have wanted to be liked. They've been suckers for any policy that casts them as caring

Better yet, prevent those boats from landing in Kent to begin with, and tow them somewhere other than the British mainland. Not necessarily Rwanda; how about retired cruise ships, so long as there's no all-you-can-eat seafood buffet. Consider eliminating asylum altogether. Making foreign-born non-citizens ineligible for social housing would be a start. Be mean.

Chuck racial preferences, stop pandering to race and gender grifters and return to merit. Tell the police their job isn't making people cordial and compassionate but keeping them from killing each other. Defend even nasty free speech.

A nasty party could go at the welfare budget with the requisite callousness. It could announce that being worried or sad is part of normal life and does not oblige other people who get up early and work very hard to buy your lunch. It could either severely tighten or scrap whole disability categories of 'mental health' or at the minimum demand rigorous in-person diagnosis rather than a few minutes of TikTok-coached interviews on Zoom. It could decide that being overweight is not the same disability in scale or in kind as having multiple sclerosis, and those extra stone don't earn you a free Volvo. Or it could junk Personal Independence Payments altogether and provide small accessible buses that transport a dozen disabled passengers at once, as New York has done for years – although a no-free-Volvo scheme might prove rather less popular. It could brutally trim the ranks of students claiming to have special needs, and for God's sake stop driving them all to school in taxis.

A war on bureaucratic sentimentality would require a steely obliviousness to Channel 4 News packages about families from Afghanistan with adorable children who've been denied a council house (along with scads of British families with adorable children who've also been denied a council house) and *Guardian*-esque exposés about supposedly suicidal depressives who failed their interview for disability assistance. (Remember the hair-tear over the 'bedroom tax'?) Only a certain hard-heartedness will rescue Britain's public finances from a debt crisis that's increasingly a matter of not whether but when. Only a certain hard-heartedness will prevent the UK's once neighbourly and culturally coherent population from sliding into a crowd in an island-wide airport terminal with a Babel of languages where rootless passengers merely trip over one another's luggage.

The Tories may still be unelectable. But Reform is fragile and too dependent on one slightly peculiar fellow. For now, small-c conservatives shouldn't write off the Conservatives altogether, a party with a historically distinguished track record if we take the long view. Kemi is making the right noises. If she can clean the house of all those wet CINOs – a big if – she might make a formidable PM.

JOHN BROADLEY

Wild ambitions

Turtle doves and the myth of rewilding

MATT RIDLEY

In the latest success story for reintroducing species to the British countryside, turtle doves, reared in captivity and released at three locations in Somerset and Devon last year, have returned to breed. Turtle doves have steeply declined in numbers, hanging on in the south and east of the country, but this scheme opens a new front in the battle to save the species as a British summer visitor.

In May 2025, 244 captive-bred turtle doves were set free across three sites. Like others of their species, they spent the winter in Africa but a handful found their way back to south-west England this summer.

Reintroductions like this are now all the rage among conservationists because it is a policy that can have spectacular results. Red kites, sea eagles, cranes and storks have returned to throng British skies after becoming extinct (or nearly so in the case of kites). Golden eagles have expanded their range in southern Scotland and black grouse in the North York Moors as a result of reintroductions from other parts of Britain.

Plus, of course, in the world of mammals, wild boar are rampaging through the Forest of Dean, beavers are being released all over the place, pine martens are being moved into new areas and there's talk of lynx. Nor is the reintroduction craze confined to vertebrates. The large blue butterfly went extinct in Britain in 1979 but was brought back four years later and currently survives at 33 sites across the south of England.

Is reintroduction rewilding? No, I don't think it is. That word means letting land go back to nature of its own accord, hands off. Yet the turtle dove scheme is badged as a rewilding effort and the white storks are a flagship species for Knepp Estate, the nation's most famous rewilding project. At Knepp, the rebounding populations of nightingales and purple emperor butterflies are indeed examples of what hands-off rewilding can achieve, but the storks are surely an example of something else: human interference to undo the deleterious effects of previous human interference.

My point is not a semantic one. It is to argue that the best nature conservation, in a landscape vastly altered by human beings, requires active human intervention, not passive neglect. We know this from the most successful of all 'managed wilding' projects, which is heather moorland, home to huge numbers of the British Isles's only endemic bird species, the red grouse, alongside thriving endangered curlews, heaps of rare sphagnum mosses and plenty of other wildlife.

This is achieved by the very opposite of leaving the landscape alone: private landowners graze, burn and cut the vegetation to create a mosaic of habitats for the birds and mosses. Meanwhile, they relentlessly wage war on the unnatural numbers of crows, foxes and stoats that human activity has artificially encouraged – and which, if left uncontrolled, make it impossible for ground-nesting birds to breed.

In short, interference in the ecosystem is vital to achieve biodiversity and abundance. Or, as the Californian thinker Stewart Brand once put it: 'We are as gods and might as well get good at it.' Reintroduction schemes prove the point.

I once took a paleo-ecologist for a walk on my farm and he exclaimed: 'This is crying out for a megafauna'

Not all reintroductions are welcome. The sea eagle is a spectacular creature but putting them back in the Lake District, as is currently under discussion, would be a mistake. There is little natural prey for them so they would have to eat a lot of lambs, which to put it mildly does not thrill the local farmers, and they would probably prevent golden eagles colonising the area. The champions of seabird colonies off west Wales and Northumberland similarly dread the return of sea eagles: one bird can panic a thousand guillemots into a stampede that takes all their eggs into the sea.

'Taking cash from fraudsters, or their mothers, is never a good idea.'

Likewise, when a few years ago some bearded weirdos tried to persuade Northumbrian sheep farmers that lynx would be cuddly additions to the local fauna, it went down badly. And wild boar are a menace to walkers, dogs and gardeners wherever they turn up. I have often made the point that beavers are welcome on my farm but only if I am permitted to shoot them if they dam the one ditch that drains much of the low-lying land. So making them protected was a mistake. There's no problem, say ecologists, since you can get a permit to kill a rogue beaver. How long would it take to get the permit? Probably four months. In that case forget it, I reply.

A heavily populated, intensively cultivated island is never going to get all its fauna back. Those who talk of wolf, bear, bison and moose in the British countryside are being unrealistic. I once took an Australian paleo-ecologist for a walk on my farm and as he looked at the verdant undergrowth he exclaimed: 'This is crying out for a megafauna.' Mammoths are extinct, I pointed out. 'Then get some elephants,' he replied.

It is time conservationists stopped being obsessed with large and predatory animals. The species I want to see brought back are smaller, less violent ones: black-tailed godwits, which now breed all over Iceland and would love parts of the Pennines; ruffs, which used to be very numerous here and could be again; red-backed shrikes, which were once common but now show up only sporadically; corncrakes, once everywhere but now found mostly on Scottish islands; wrynecks, which ceased breeding here some years ago. And maybe the burbot, a small freshwater fish related to cod that was last seen here in 1969.

And then one day, great auks. These penguin-sized, flightless fish-eating birds are globally extinct. But we have sequenced the genome from guts preserved in spirit in Copenhagen, and it will surely soon be possible to edit the genome of the closely related razorbill into that of the great auk and rear a chick in a laboratory. I would give my right arm to see them swimming off the Farne Islands before I die.

Funny business

Social media has saved comedy

JOHN POWER

In 2022, a 16-year-old called Kane Parsons began to post a web series called 'Backrooms' on his YouTube channel, drawing inspiration from a famous 4chan meme. That year, the film studio A24 contacted him and began production on a full-length feature film of the same name, which was released in May. The film has grossed $350 million worldwide and Kane, who turned 21 last month, is the youngest director ever to have a film open at number one in the North American box office.

Parsons's stunning success has started a race in Hollywood to scout for talent in the online world. In this respect Hollywood is playing catch-up to British comedy, where talent agencies are constantly scanning platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and YouTube to find content creators with the talent to take their acts mainstream. And so social media, for all its apparent flaws, has created a new meritocracy in the world of entertainment, enabling people from ordinary backgrounds to achieve mainstream success at frighteningly young ages.

One such young person is Katie Kennedy, an Oxford master's student who began making provocative yet informative history videos when she was in her final year of her undergraduate degree. Her videos carry title captions such as 'Was Anne of Cleves a minger?' and 'Was Marie Antoinette a snooty cow?'. In contrast to this bombast, Katie was a shy, bookish child who was obsessed with the *Horrible Histories* TV show, whose songs she has committed to memory ('Charles II: King of Bling' is her favourite).

When Katie first began making her videos for social media, she was so embarrassed that she searched for every single person she knew from school or university on TikTok and blocked them one by one. Katie now has more than 600,000 followers on TikTok and some of her videos have over ten million views. She has a show on Sky, *History Crush*, and her own book.

What is most remarkable about her success is that it was all built within three short years. Katie is emphatic that without social media she would not have begun a career in comedy, particularly as somebody from the north-east without family connections in media.

It has been suggested by government ministers that one of the valuable things that traditional broadcasters bring to the media landscape is that they can spread opportunity outside London and the south-east. But one of the advantages of online content creation is that it can be done from anywhere in the world.

Social media, for all its apparent flaws, has created a new meritocracy in the world of entertainment

Leah White, another comedian with 232,000 followers on TikTok, tells me that her online success has allowed her to remain living in Toronto full-time near friends and family while building up her profile as an actress. Instead of having to move to Los Angeles to work through the audition route, she has been able to take roles in high-budget films through her online portfolio. She has recently returned from shoots in Panama and London for Gary Sinyor's upcoming romantic comedy *Perfect Wedding Days*.

Monica Geldart, a content creator and actor who has 1.8 million followers on TikTok, watched Catherine Tate and Victoria Wood as a child. Her characters are clearly rooted in where she grew up near Harrogate; many of them are nosy and vindictive in the way that residents of somewhat affluent suburbs often are. She tells me that she tried to move to London in 2022 but 'only lasted six months before I was back in Yorkshire', and that she feels 'very lucky to be able to stay in Yorkshire and keep chasing my dreams'.

Finlay Christie is another TikTok comedian who has enjoyed a swift ascent. He is known best for his 'What *Peep Show* would be like if it was set in 2025' series. Christie has more than 600,000 subscribers on YouTube, where he has amassed over 360 million views. Christie has managed to transfer his online work directly into stand-up comedy tours, the latest of which will cover 35 dates across Britain and Ireland.

Christie began to make videos at the beginning of lockdown at the age of 20. His popularity grew so quickly that by the time lockdown began to lift he already had a big enough audience to start doing live shows. Christie feels strongly that he never wants to go entirely over to television because the creative compromises would be too stifling. He compares the future of comedy with video pornography, saying that while there will always be a place for studio productions for a mainstream audience, services like OnlyFans provide a way for creators to directly monetise their core fanbase.

One industry source, Ivo Pope, tells me that algorithm-led targeting has led 'broader formats like panel shows' to lose relevance and viewership. All four of the comedians I spoke to have a very narrow demographic target, with their content usually performing best among the 25-to-30 age range. Their jokes do not have to cross generations or cultural divides. In one of Christie's videos, he makes a reference to the subreddit UK Personal Finance, a small online communi-

ty mostly populated by people in their late twenties and early thirties who are anxious about getting their first mortgage – a category which includes me, and so I laugh along, strangely flattered to feel recognised.

Heather Winstanley, a senior talent manager at Insanity Talent Management, tells me that trying to pursue a career in comedy without a social media presence would be 'making life brutally hard for yourself'. She remembers a time when being 'digital first' was looked down upon by TV executives as if it were a lesser category, but now online creators have audiences 'that some comedians could only dream of in venues'.

The trend in TV commissioning since the early 2010s has been to move away from expensive, risky sketch shows towards cheap panel shows. This has been born of necessity: the cost of producing broadcast television has risen immensely. Between 2014 and 2020, the average budget per hour for high-end TV rose from more than £1.5 million to just shy of £4 million. This, combined with falling advertising revenues as broadcast audiences shrink, means the margins for error are much smaller, creating a structural bias towards playing it safe with bankable stars. In a sense, online comedians, who produce sketches, stand-up and character comedy on low to no budgets, were filling

a gap which mainstream broadcasters had opened up.

One broadcaster which seeks to buck this trend is Sky, which has launched *SNL UK*, an offshoot of the very popular US sketch comedy show *Saturday Night Live*. The comedians and agents I speak to about it are positive about the venture, glad that a large network is willing to invest serious money and take a risk on British comedy, particularly as they have not drawn talent from what Winstanley calls the 'exhausted carousel of panel-show regulars' but have instead cast non-mainstream talent, some of them – Jack Shep and Al Nash – having backgrounds making online content.

The relationship between online comedy creators and the extant comedy industry is not yet settled. If history is any guide, there is likely to be some sort of rapprochement in which incumbent networks adapt and regain some measure of control.

The internet had a transformational impact on music. Piracy websites like Napster threatened to destroy traditional distribution networks dominated by Sony, Universal and Warner, while platforms like MySpace promised to allow musicians to bypass industry gatekeepers entirely. Two decades later, although the internet has transformed how music is made and discovered, the major labels remain powerful. Most people now pay to listen through streaming services, and those platforms have created a new ecosystem which established industry players have learned to master.

No musician better sums up this illusion of disintermediation than Clairo, who became a viral success after presenting herself as a 'bedroom pop' artist, posting lo-fi videos of herself singing from home on YouTube. It later emerged, however, that she was the daughter of a prominent music executive.

Online comedy seems to be following the same trajectory. The next great comic talents may well be discovered through TikTok instead of Footlights or the Edinburgh Fringe, but the careers built from those platforms increasingly lead back towards agents, broadcasters and studios. They are, in a sense, happy victims of their own success.

THE SPECTATOR

WEDNESDAY 29 JULY

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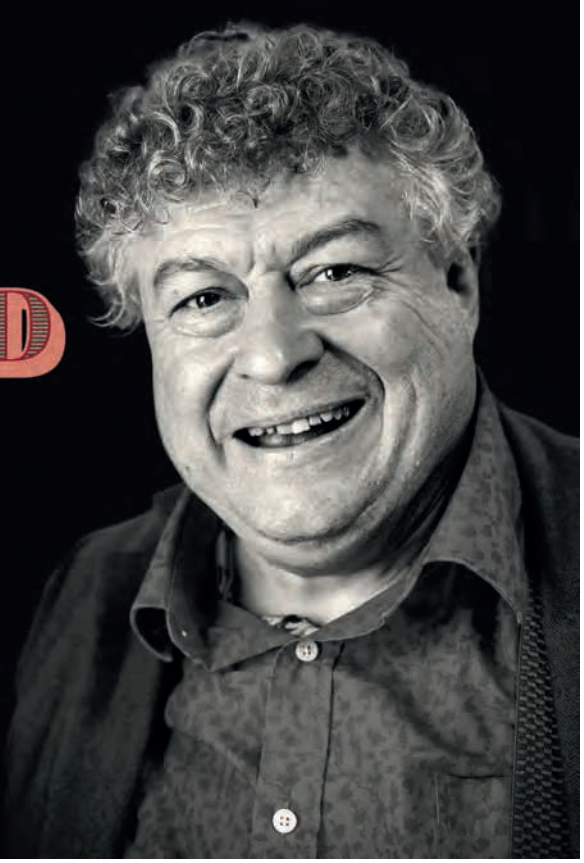

Virtue reality

Wales's mad policy of decolonisation

TALI FRASER

A teenager in Wales might want to play video games, hang out with their friends or even, dare I suggest it, read a book. The Welsh government, however, would prefer they put on a headset and confront their 'unconscious bias'. It has created a £1.2 million metaverse, the 'world's first anti-racist virtual world', to teach Welsh teens about their 'white privilege'. But this is only one element of an official commitment to end racism by 2030. Not today, not yesterday, but a specific year in the future.

The idea for an Anti-racist Wales Action Plan – ArWAP – was born following fervour around the Black Lives Matter movement, and an official plan followed in 2022. Now it reaches into almost every element of Welsh public, and private, life – from libraries to nurseries and museums to landlords. Even Welsh cakes aren't safe.

One line in the 'Logic Model' of the updated ArWAP in 2024, with a foreword by then Labour first minister Eluned Morgan (Plaid Cymru is also supportive of the plan), revealed the ambition to change 'the beliefs and behaviour of the white majority', the 93.8 per cent of Welsh people, with results measured by a Race Disparity Evidence Unit. Nothing sinister-sounding there.

The plan starts, of course, with the past, and how to alter it. A colour-coded guide to historic sites, street names and buildings was developed ahead of ArWAP to mark the degree of 'certainty and/or culpability' in their links with slavery or colonialism. The Buccaneer Inn, Tenby, gets amber – 'personal culpability uncertain' – as its sign depicts a stereotypical pirate who 'preyed on ships involved in the slave trade', even if they were also 'known to have racially diverse crews'. Columbus House, a modern office block that houses the Ministry of Justice's asylum and immigration tribunal, is flagged as red for its 'clear name association' with Christopher Columbus. Road names after the British explorer Francis Drake are marked red too.

Then there was the £10,000 grant to 'decolonise' the Welsh cake, the sugar- and spice-laden treat that has been enjoyed across the country since the 19th century. The museum at David Lloyd George's childhood cottage hired a government-funded 'decolonisation consultant' to change its approach to history. Guidance on statues warns that those of 'powerful, older, able-bodied white men' might be 'offensive' to modern viewers, citing Admiral Nelson, Thomas Picton and the Duke of Wellington as examples. Each move seems a little more absurd than the last.

An official blog post by Amgueddfa Cymru/Museum Wales, on its 'Charter for Decolonising' led to the assessment that slavery is 'woven into the warp and weft of Welsh society' and that there are objects requiring decolonisation 'in every store, on every shelf, and in every gallery'. Comments on the post are less keen. A user called S. Borrett wrote: 'Why should we be ashamed of our history? I'm proud of my country and this seemingly constant shaming of the UK and rewriting/hiding our past is shameful.'

It gets sillier. A government-funded report by Climate Cymru BAME suggested 'dog-free areas' be introduced as part of the Welsh government's anti-racism action plan.

Nurseries have been told to look out for hate crimes, with childminders advised to call police for 'racist incidents'

Apparently ethnic minorities are not allowed to enjoy a dog run around the park. Bizarrely, the suggestion features in the report's conclusions, but there are no other mentions of dogs in the full report.

Library staff, as part of a £130,000 project to address 'colonial attitudes' and create 'new historic narratives', could be trained to challenge the 'dominant paradigm of whiteness' through 'critical whiteness studies'. School set-text lists are being reviewed for racist language, with the potential for future revisions by the Welsh exam board and the diversity and anti-racist professional learning (DARPL) group.

Nurseries have been told to be on the lookout for toddler hate crimes, with taxpayer-funded guidance for childminders – working with children aged 12 and below, including babies and toddlers – advising them to call police for 'racist incidents' that could be deemed a hate crime. If it is not a hate crime, childcare workers could offer more 'age-appropriate learning support opportunities for the individual perpetrator'; if that doesn't work there is a disciplinary flowchart to follow instead. A consultation for young people document on ArWAP highlights 'white privilege' and claims 'dealing with racism is more important than ever' – which seems to imply that, until recently, it wasn't very important at all.

Private landlords are also told to participate in the target and encouraged to undergo Hate Crime Awareness training from Rent Smart Wales, the government service that landlords and agents must be registered with. In a new information document seen by *The Spectator*, Rent Smart Wales advises them to report hate crimes on a tenant's behalf, since 'tenants may not realise they've experienced a hate crime'. Consent, it says, is preferred but 'not required'.

One Welsh landlord tells me: 'This infantilisation of issues by governments is so depressing. You're assumed not to have even half an ounce of common sense or intelligence… how do you even judge whether you have achieved a non-racist status? It's objective tosh and absolute slop of the first order and this is all costing us money.' The taxpayer-funded housing charity Tai Pawb even employs an anti-racism manager to help implement ArWAP.

A landlord's base assumption, it seems, should be that their ethnic-minority tenant might not be able to realise they have been a victim of a hate crime – and that it should be reported even if the tenant would rather it wasn't. Another Welsh landlord remarks: 'You don't dare curse the person who did a hate crime, just in case you get accused of it yourself. It is bonkers.' Although the training is not mandatory, yet, the updated ArWAP floats integrating such initiatives into the Rent Smart Wales Code of Practice, which is statutory.

The foreword to the original ArWAP reads: 'Individuals who believe that they are not racist but who are not actively engaged in eradicating racism may inadvertently be supporting the existing racialised system we are trying to change.' So what does that say for the 2030 target? If people believe it is sorted so no longer actively engage in eradicating racism, are they racist once more? The oddly specific deadline almost has the feel of a closing-down sale ('get it before it's gone'), as though racism is allowed to exist for a few more years. As one Welsh source jokes: 'The Welsh are incredibly racist towards the English. What are they going to do about that?'

In the Welsh metaverse, over-16s can explore the hardships faced by Romani travellers, the Bosnian genocide and famine in India under British rule, while in the real Wales they can enjoy underperforming health and education systems. But at least their Welsh cakes won't taste like colonialism.

The right kind of devolution

Sir: Your leading article 'The Burnham Question' (11 July) suggests that the putative prime minister's enthusiasm for devolution might be a good thing, provided that it is the right kind of devolution. Although Andy Burnham would never admit it, devolution of the Manchester and Teesside type succeeds because, in both cases, business is given the chance to thrive. By contrast, devolution to the Scottish parliament and Senedd has stifled economic growth, while providing a platform for nationalist politicians to bash the UK. A true believer in effective devolution would scrap these national institutions and transfer power to business-friendly bodies in cities and regions across the UK. Sadly, I doubt that Burnham has either the courage or conviction to take such a radical step.
Jeff Green
Bath

Royal omission

Sir: Dot Wordsworth (Mind your language, 4 July) discusses the sobriquet 'King of the North', now bestowed upon Andy Burnham. But she overlooks the significant history of the Percy family, Earls of Northumberland from when William de Percy stepped ashore with William the Conqueror.

The story is depicted in *Kings in the North* by Alexander Rose, published in 2003. This fine history encompasses the period pretty much up until the Battle of Bosworth in 1485 and describes the role over many years of one of the most influential dynastic families in England, in residence to this day in Alnwick Castle.

They are also remembered through their ownership of Petworth House in Sussex, now in the hands of the National Trust.
Michael Brown
Walton on the Hill, Surrey

I agree with Nigel

Sir: Dominic Cummings's remarks ('There's going to be a big push to rejoin the EU', 11 July) have opened my eyes to what is happening to Nigel Farage. I think he should have been more transparent about the gifts he received, and I am not impressed by his friendship with Donald Trump. I am suspicious of conspiracy theories but when the attacks on the Reform leader include publication in the *Times* of a picture of his daughter's home and when there is agreement between all the other parties not to contest the by-election, my hackles rise. I hope they will rise in Essex, too. Massive support for Farage from the voters of Clacton would assert the power of democracy against the machinations of the Europhile establishment.
John Hicks
Manchester

Two's company

Sir: May I make another suggestion for smaller weddings ('Marry in haste', 4 July)? Forget Gretna; instead choose one of the elopement venues dotted round the country and escape your own wedding. We opted for a mill in Devon and had a cream tea for our wedding breakfast. No guests and no arguments.
Nicola Jones
Shropshire

Farce and the Force

Sir: Mary Wakefield's article 'British policing has descended into farce' (11 July) is illustrated in the following situation. In the past few days a collection of large motorhomes has arrived at a popular beauty spot near my home. They removed the height bar across the entrance and took down a low fence so they could set up camp on the grassy area by the car park. When I was walking there yesterday, the public path was partially blocked by a stove and barbecue grill. I phoned the East Lothian Council Office on Friday and was put through to the roads department, who were not answering the phone. I left my name and number and was told someone would phone me back. Needless to say, no one did.

Today the vehicles are still there. The main item on BBC Scottish News reports that at Edinburgh airport the police confiscated the electronic devices of one Craig Houston, said to be a 'right-wing blogger', even though he has not been charged or arrested. Please would someone explain to me why the police are taking action over someone's opinions while no action is taken against people who break the law and vandalise property?
Alison Carter
Musselburgh, Scotland

Mass pleasure

Sir: I am relieved to learn from Damian Thompson that Pope Leo's excommunication of the Society of St Pius X does not apply to those who continue occasionally to attend its services ('All at See', 11 July). My visits to Paris would be bleak without the wonders of the packed Sunday High Mass at Saint-Nicolas-du-Chardonnet. There, amid the Latin chant, the sumptuous vestments and the clouds of incense, one can still catch that glimpse of Heaven which used to be available in every Catholic church until the post-Vatican II reforms. The excommunication will almost certainly be counter-productive, the Vatican having thrown petrol on the smouldering embers of the Lefebvrist schism. I can hardly wait for my next visit.
Francis Bown
London E3

Stifling hot debate

Sir: There is another aspect that Toby Young could have added to his theories of why the left is refusing to debate the climate issue (No Sacred Cows, 11 July). Climate science relies heavily on computer modelling and statistical probabilities. While mainstream climate scientists often understate these inherent uncertainties, sceptical scientists frequently place them at the centre of their argument. In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, public debate between these two sides were commonplace. However, these events routinely concluded with a measurable audience shift toward scepticism or uncertainty – a result that shocked climate campaigners.

In response, advocates began arguing that adversarial debate created a 'false balance' by signalling an even split within the scientific community. Yet by adopting this stance, campaigners overlooked the reality that scientific controversies are an integral part of the scientific process and are rarely evenly divided. Driven by these early debate outcomes, most scientific institutions and news organisations altered their approach, effectively abandoning open debates regarding the causes and impacts of climate change. As a direct consequence of this strategy of effective censorship, public trust in both news and scientific institutions has steadily eroded across most western countries.
Benny Peiser
Liverpool

Lost in translation

Sir: Charlie Methven ('What's the point of Eton?', 11 July) comments that Eton is not 'primarily an academic school'. Winston Churchill once used a Latin phrase in the House of Commons. Greeted by shouts of 'Translate!' he responded: 'Certainly I will translate, for the benefit of any Old Etonians who may be present.' Churchill was, of course, an Old Harrovian.
John Graham-Leigh
Westbury, Wiltshire

We have a consignment of Gentleman's Relish, a pot of which will be sent to the writer of the best letter each week. This week's winner is John Graham-Leigh.

Binface has shown Burnham how to make a manifesto

Count Binface's manifesto, made for Makerfield and tweaked for Clacton, is a rare point of light in today's Stygian political landscape. Could there be a more concise satirical takedown than 'I will cut your taxes and raise everyone else's' or a sharper transport policy than 'Wifi on trains that works; also trains that work'? This weekend offers a last chance for mischief-makers to suggest a matching agenda for Andy Burnham, before the real ragbag of inner-Labour compromise is unveiled over the coming weeks. Here's my four-point contribution.

First, don't nationalise anything, not even Thames Water. You – that means we, your taxpayers – can't afford to buy utility companies, you certainly can't confiscate them from share- and bondholders, and you know in your Blairite heart that however incompetent the private sector may sometimes be, state ownership was worse. Your much-vaunted Manchester 'Bee Network', imposing co-ordinated timetables on private bus operators, looked like nationalisation but wasn't. That's your model.

Second, appoint an enterprise tsar who's not a Labour donor and definitely not the motormouth green-energy tycoon Dale Vince. Give your tsar an office next to yours (yes, in Manchester as well as Downing Street) with a blue-sky brief to devise policies that will rescue British entrepreneurship from everything Rachel Reeves leaves behind. If you want a home-territory candidate, how about John Roberts of Bolton, who founded the billion-turnover appliance retailer AO World for a £1 pub bet?

Third, appoint an energy secretary whose one-line brief is to bring UK electricity costs down, by whatever means necessary, to the European average: at least a 30 per cent cut for domestic users, deeper for business. Sack the minister if that's not achieved within 12 months. And while you're at it, scrap those Starmer steel tariffs that have piled even more cost pressure on what's left of British industry.

Fourth, appoint anyone but Ed Miliband as chancellor, even Count Binface.

America first

David Potter, who died last month, was the scientist turned entrepreneur behind the Psion Organiser, a handheld device launched in 1984 at a time when British electronics were at the forefront of global advance. He ranks with Sir Clive Sinclair, creator of the ZX Spectrum personal computer, and Hermann Hauser, co-founder of Acorn Computers and the Cambridge-based chip designer Arm, as pioneers who deserved to stand alongside the titans of Silicon Valley. Mike Lynch, creator of the Autonomy software venture, was a later but more controversial candidate.

The fact that no one from over here has ever joined the digital hall of fame can largely be blamed on a relative lack of financial support at every stage, particularly the absence of 'patient capital' prepared to take long-term bets on brilliant ideas, and the inadequacies of the London stock market. Potter himself said in a 2016 interview: 'I think in hindsight that we weren't American enough. I don't mean that the Americans have anything superior to offer in a wider sense. But what they do have is a culture and infrastructure which is very focused on taking enormous risks… In London you had to be concerned about shorter-term profit. I think if I had been in America I might have done what [the Amazon founder] Jeff Bezos did: never worry about profit at all.'

David Potter was a great British innovator but – like the most richly rewarded of all risk-takers, Elon Musk – he was born in South Africa and left as a student. How different might Potter's destiny have been if, as Musk did, he had gone to America?

easyJet's fate

Another aspect of the transatlantic imbalance is the flow of attractive British businesses into the grasp of US private equity – a trend I apologise for banging on about, but one which represents a serious exodus of value and potential. The latest target is easyJet, for which a £5.5 billion offer from one US private-equity player, Castlelake, has been trumped by richer terms from another, Apollo – an apex predator of the sector.

What next? Worryingly, the *Financial Times* quotes research that says the airline could be worth £7 billion if broken up into its component elements of aircraft, landing slots and package holidays; or made more profitable by shrinking its ratio of employees per plane to match Ryanair's. Either way, both the risk and the reward will be in American hands – but the likeliest loser is the British or European passenger in search of courteous service and on-time low-cost travel.

Hair today

I'm in Yorkshire for the rest of July, avoiding the airless heat of London and enjoying our beautiful county's summer menu of modestly priced entertainment and pork-pie picnics. The Ryedale music festival – which I helped privatise 30 years ago when the local council no longer wanted to pay for it – is now recognised as one of Britain's finest. The Three Inch Fools, touring a riotous show called *King Arthur and the Holy Fail*, set a national benchmark for high-energy outdoor theatre. And the 1812 Theatre Company at Helmsley Arts Centre, of which I'm also a proud founder, has just staged a spellbinding production of *Educating Rita* that provoked a new train of thought.

Willy Russell's play is about self-realisation through higher education for a young Liverpudlian hairdresser, mentored by a boozed-up middle-aged tutor. Premiered in 1980, it now counts as a classic alongside George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* of 1913, which it echoes. And it's almost as dated, because today's sad reversal is that no one would urge a bright twentysomething to study poetry at university as a path to a better future. Even without AI, everyone knows there are too many graduates, too many bad teachers and far too many useless degrees. Hairdressing, on the other hand, is a respected skill, a vital contribution to the social fabric, and a job for life.

BOOKS & ARTS

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The fall of Troy in Christopher Nolan's The Odyssey
Deborah Ross – p42

Sinclair McKay admires the way the sitcom 'Allo 'Allo! deftly turned darkness to slapstick
Jason Burke describes the arrogance and vanity of the terrorist Andreas Baader
Philip Womack surveys the many English translations of Homer over the centuries
James Delingpole succumbs to Little House on the Prairie
Rupert Christiansen celebrates the 100th anniversary of one of Britain's last remaining world-class institutions
Damian Thompson listens to a symphonic masterpiece that most music-lovers would struggle to identify

BOOKS

Mission impossible

Jonathan Sumption traces the course of the disastrous Fifth Crusade

The Fifth Crusade: A History of the Epic Campaign to Conquer Egypt
by Thomas Smith
Yale University Press, £25, pp. 304

The Fifth Crusade, which was fought between 1217 and 1221, marked a new direction for the crusading movement of the Middle Ages. Instead of invading Palestine, as the first three crusades had done, and the Fourth Crusade might have done, the crusaders decided to attack Egypt. That was not the original idea. The formidable Pope Innocent III, who launched the Fifth Crusade, had envisaged a repeat of the old strategy of marching on Jerusalem from the sea. The invasion of Egypt was decided by the initial wave of forces after they had reached the Levant.

There was a sort of logic behind the decision. The crusading kingdom of Jerusalem had been destroyed in 1187, when its army had suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of Saladin at the Horns of Hattin above the Sea of Galilee. Jerusalem was occupied. Thirteenth-century Palestine became part of the empire of the Ayyubids, a Kurdish dynasty with its capital at Cairo. By 1217, the Christians were reduced to the principality of Antioch in northern Syria and three small coastal enclaves around the cities of Acre, Tyre and Tripoli. None of these territories could sustain a large army for very long.

The crusaders were divided about what they might achieve by invading Egypt. The more ambitious leaders envisaged a permanent occupation of the largest and richest Islamic territory of the Middle East. Others had more modest ideas. They hoped to extract terms from the Ayyubid sultan which might see Jerusalem and at least part of the old crusader kingdom restored to them.

The result was a disaster, like all the crusades after the first two. The troops landed from the sea in May 1218 and besieged Damietta, the principal commercial city of the Nile Delta. The siege lasted for 18 months, until November 1219, when the city was abandoned by its population after most had died of starvation and disease. But the Christians had difficulty in exploiting their victory. In August 1221, as they tried to reach Cairo, they were encircled by the Muslim army near Mansurah and forced to enter into a humiliating treaty, by which they surrendered Damietta and withdrew empty-handed from Egypt.

Thomas Smith has written an excellent account of the war, based mainly on the chronicle of the siege of Damietta by the German schoolmaster and amateur engineer Oliver of Cologne, the newsletters of the French firebrand Jacques de Vitry, both of them witnesses, and the celebrated history by the Kurdish scholar Ibn al-Athir, who was living far away in Mosul but had excellent sources.

In the end, the crusaders were a handful of Christian interlopers in the vast and populous Islamic world

Smith's writing is lively, readable and accurate. But he has been infected by the crusading spirit. He is an admirer of Pelagius, the cardinal-bishop of Albano, papal legate and armchair general, whose aggressive instincts contributed to the capture of Damietta but also to the disaster at Mansurah. The author seems to believe that the conception was sound and that the whole enterprise might have succeeded but for some rotten luck and a few unfortunate mistakes.

In fact, the project could never have succeeded, even if the crusaders had been agreed about what would count as success. They had the finest troops in the Mediterranean world: the Templars were a remarkable professional army, with a formidable financial network to support them. But in the end, the critical fact was that they were a handful of Christian interlopers in the vast and populous Islamic world, without the decisive technological superiority which would enable Europeans to conquer most of the globe in the 18th and 19th centuries.

The crusaders could never have maintained a permanent occupation of Egypt, let alone colonised it with European Christians. Any concessions that they might have wrung out of the Ayyubids would have been repudiated as soon as the opportunity arose. It is significant that when the Egyptian sultan al-Adil offered at one point to restore the kingdom of Jerusalem if the crusaders would go away, he insisted on retaining some critical fortresses which would have made it indefensible against the inevitable counter-attack. That was why the offer was rejected.

The crusading spirit remained the obsession of the Papacy, the kings of France and a handful of Christian propagandists, but among the populations of Europe it was already waning. Volunteers earned indulgences by participating in these expeditions; but very few of them had any interest in settling in the Holy Land, as the first generation of crusaders had done at the outset of the 12th century. They came for a season and went home.

The tragedy of the crusades was that the remarkable success of the first one, which had conquered much of the Levant, including Jerusalem itself, set a standard of achievement for later generations which they could not match and were increasingly uninterested in trying to.

Conquest has been a basic instinct of human societies throughout history. The crusades were a rather special version of that instinct. The Christian soldiers and settlers who were permanently based in the Levant were hard-headed realists; for the populations of Europe, however, the crusading movement at its height was above all a spiritual phenomenon. The crusaders wanted salvation and the keys to paradise. To criticise them on logistical and strategic grounds is a mug's game. But if the crusades were a sin, it surely consisted in casting away so many human lives in a venture so utterly misconceived.

BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

Ce fait de ces ex lermes contre damiette mij mj
more de mar apres lassemon
nre seigneur lee coyonce
furent apparaillez et armez
et sen alerent en galees et en autres
nez et vindrent en acre Et Jehan Roy

Entry of the crusaders into Damietta
(Le Miroir Historial by Vincent de Beauvais)

Richard Gibson as the Gestapo officer Otto Flick and Kim Hartman as Helga Geerhart in 'Allo 'Allo!, c. 1989

GEORGES DE KEERLE/GETTY IMAGES

Pushing the boundaries

Sinclair McKay

Still Laughing: How the Sitcom Kept Britain Smiling in the '80s
by Robert Sellers
The History Press, £25, pp. 308

The foundations of all British situation comedy were laid by Charles Dickens. If you were to remove that tiresome fun-sponge Little Nell and her wholly meaningless death from *The Old Curiosity Shop*, for instance, you would have before you, in more pleasing proportions, a rich array of recurring comic characters in a variety of scenarios. There are Kit Nubbles and his oyster-adoring family; Abel Garland and his anarchy-prone pony; the preposterous boulevardier Dick Swiveller; and of course the monstrous Daniel Quilp, at war with his wife, his mother-in-law, and the boy who walks on his hands outside the wharf window. The point is that you look forward to seeing them all; it's not so much about wit as about foibles. Situation comedy goes beyond the reflexive laugh and invites glowing affection. You see it today in those doting fans who continue to worship the Trotter family and their illimitable knocked-off goods from *Only Fools and Horses.*

Robert Sellers has previously explored 1970s sitcoms. The lustre of these chronicles of decline – *Rising Damp*, *The Fall and Rise of Reginald Perrin* and the melancholic *Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads?* – never fades. But the sitcoms produced in the 1980s had a rather more inventive range.

Sellers canters with helter-skelter speed and economy, year by year, through every sitcom made on every channel. We move from the sophistication of *Yes Minister* and *Blackadder* to the raucous sauce of Robin Askwith in ITV's *Bottle Boys*, a universally reviled randy milkman proposition unlikely ever to be viewed again. The advent of Channel 4 brought us *Desmond's*, a pioneering black sitcom. This was important because comedy – as opposed to hard-hitting drama – conjured intimacy: prejudice lightly dissolved by artful comic structure.

Young relatives of mine are goggle-eyed with admiration at how deftly 'Allo 'Allo! turns darkness to slapstick

In the course of Sellers's breathless progress through dozens of sitcoms, most of which you will have wholly forgotten (*No Place Like Home*, *Holding the Fort*, *Three Up, Two Down*), we are invited to envisage a vanished television landscape we once took for granted: programmes produced in front of live audiences, performed almost as though in a theatre under a proscenium arch. The sound of live laughter was deemed vital. Scripts and performances were calibrated minutely around lattice-works of gags. Recently, the determinedly retro *Mrs Brown's Boys* has been pretty much alone in insisting on a live audience – there to reassure you that you are not alone in finding vulgarity sinfully amusing.

There are capsule interviews that Sellers has conducted with various actors and producers which make you start to appreciate the vexing craft of eliciting robust laughs from such audiences – and in turn the way that performers could bounce off them. Superior turns such as Anton Rodgers, Penelope Wilton and Judi Dench were lured in by the challenge. They were not slumming it – they wanted to master a form that others, such as Richard Briers, had perfected.

In the midst of all this it is lovely to revisit long-familiar comedies – and to be shocked by them. The BBC's *'Allo 'Allo!*, which ran for about 90 episodes to audiences of 14 million, took the story of heroic wartime French resistance, Wehrmacht cruelty and Gestapo sadism and turned it into ruthless bedroom farce. The series was utterly black-hearted throughout – and consequently shout-makingly funny. Young relatives of mine are goggle-eyed with admiration at how deftly *'Allo 'Allo!* turns darkness to slapstick.

Then there was *Hi-de-Hi!*, set in a dowdy 1950s holiday camp. Watch it now for the extraordinary layers of sadness, unrequited love and shattered hopes. The camp's genteel ballroom dance champions Barry and Yvonne Stuart-Hargreaves are the finest portrayal of a lavender marriage on screen.

As for echoes of the 1980s Conservative government, there was such a thing as 'alternative comedy' – Ben Elton delivering soliloquies about 'Thatch' and Alexei Sayle shouting about Stoke Newington – and perhaps, more broadly, this is why the mainstream sitcoms did not reflect the jagged landscape of the time. Even when 1986 brought the Carla Lane, Liverpool-set comedy *Bread*, which did feature dole queues and financial anxiety, it was wrapped within the warmth and fast-talking sentimentality of a much-loved screen family.

Funnily enough, it's the comedies that were once seen as trailblazers that don't stand up. When I was at school, everyone went mad for *The Young Ones*, which launched Rik Mayall and Ade Edmondson. It is tooth-grindingly unfunny now – unlike their later 1990s masterpiece, *Bottom*. Conversely, it's the comedies that were once regarded by the young as nauseating-

ly twee and middle class – from *Terry and June* to *Ever Decreasing Circles* – which reveal themselves as having surprising bite. A word here for the late, brilliant Penelope Keith and her toweringly snobbish character Audrey fforbes-Hamilton from *To The Manor Born*, who would surely have delighted and beguiled Dickens himself.

Parisian vignettes
Keith Miller

Château Rouge
by Amit Chaudhuri
Faber, £14.99, pp. 208

Nearly ten years ago, the author, critic and classical Indian musician Amit Chaudhuri took up a visiting fellowship in Paris. It's not quite clear from the pages of his autobiographical novel *Château Rouge* which branch of his professional life was to be nurtured by the experience, officially at least, but a glance at this slim hardback, liberally adorned with creative white space, will tell you that it is a book which leaves many things unsaid.

Chaudhuri is determined to escape the oppressive influence of the many other writers who have gone before him, to try to see this great city afresh. Chief among these is inevitably Ernest Hemingway, a man with whom, on the face of things, Chaudhuri would have little to talk about if they were to meet. (The 'time machine', which Chaudhuri occasionally deploys in *Château Rouge* as a way of considering the survival of parts of Paris that still look and feel like Paris, would make this a theoretical possibility, though it's not one he entertains.)

His choice of address for the duration of his visit is deliberate. Château Rouge, roughly the area between Montmartre and the Boulevard Périphérique, is an anomaly: a more or less Haussmann-style district with the sort of spicy, ethnic mix that has elsewhere been relegated to the banlieues. 'This is where Hemingway would have lived if he'd been here now,' says Chaudhuri's wife.

What follows is a kind of dream diary, a mirepoix of vignettes, urbanistic ruminations, fragmentary accounts of family life and the cautious, contingent friendships one makes when one's not going to be living in a place for ever. The song Chaudhuri wants to perform at his father-in-law's funeral is vetoed by the organisers on grounds of its joyfulness, until the wife of the deceased intervenes. Eventually, he picks up the copy of *A Moveable Feast* his wife gave him 32 years earlier.

There's a pleasingly baffled, donnish fastidiousness about the way both Chaudhuri and his wife relate to the small disappointments of the physical world ('The shower's life's limited'). But there's a rococo quality to the writing, and the thinking behind it: an imprecision, a conflation of essence and ornament, a belief that if something's worth saying it's worth saying twice.

It's a charming enough book about Chaudhuri, if he interests you; but it really has very little to say about Paris, not least because the author doesn't seem to eat either French food or the thrilling alternatives, whose smells greet the traveller ascending from the metro. He prefers a gruesome-sounding nearby Italian, or – at least until his daughter, radicalised against the microwave, intervenes – ready meals from Marks & Spencer.

A portrait of the artist
Ian Sansom

Contrapposto
by Dave Eggers
Canongate, £20, pp. 432

There are novelists who seem to spend their entire careers either apologising for being themselves or trying to become someone else entirely. And then there's Dave Eggers, who has spent much of the last quarter century trying – and, it has to be said,

Erik Satie is Alone

I have decided I know nothing and to start from there.
To start with a folk song I heard
across some field near Argentière
perhaps fifteen years ago.

The man singing had a poor voice
but failure is most of life.
The cracked pot, the stumble, the harvest in too late.
I would like music to take us not too far from that.

I think of villagers with oak-mallets and old hammers
bashing at stakes as if ensuring the dead stay underground
or stamping and railing at them for their deaths,
jealous of their heavy deaths, those who are filled with earth.

Jealous of their deaths with all the regret of life.
I am hanging silences between thin black notes.
I observe statues of headless men,
an exhibition of smashed vases,

The snow thickening the valleys, field-posts barely visible.
The snow blanketing and deadening
and no music possible.
I envy music that is not possible,

That crawls or stops or curls to face the other way,
that is unlooked-for as bad weather
and soaks us right through beneath the clothes
just as death is a slackening of the mouth.

I would like art to fail in whatever way it wishes.
The heart of music is to point an arm beyond the visible
to the blackness of earth crumbling underground
or otherwise the feeble stars.

– *Robert Stein*

as far as one can tell, very happily succeeding – to become Dave Eggers. Ever since *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* appeared in 2000, fulfilling almost entirely the audacious promise of its title, Eggers has occupied that peculiarly American position of being not simply Yet Another Novelist, but the Guy, the Man, the yardstick by which all others might be judged and found wanting. He's a publisher, campaigner, literacy activist, editor, artist, children's author, philanthropist and impresario. Not only is he the Guy – worse, he seems like a thoroughly nice guy.

Contrapposto, his first adult novel for several years, and, we're told by the publishers, '20 years in the making', is another worthy addition to the vast Eggers canon. Having long since abandoned the pyrotechnics and performative cleverness of some of the early books, he is now busy pondering the meaning of life.

The book's ostensible subject is art and the art world. Robert Dibb, referred to throughout as 'Cricket', discovers very young that he can draw – and, more importantly, that drawing gives him a way of being in the world. The book basically consists of a chronological account of his life, from childhood to old age, focusing on various key episodes which illustrate the nature of friendship, ambition, disappointment, etc. A portrait of the artist as a young man – and a middle-aged man and an old man.

Cricket's relationship with Olympia – variously known as Pia, Limpy and Lim – who repeatedly enters and leaves his life over the decades, provides the book with its emotional and narrative architecture. Olympia at times comes a little close to being a Manic Pixie Dream Girl, 'a sorceress and all the world's storms combined and contained'. Nevertheless, their friendship has the nice, grainy texture of actual friendship: the misunderstandings, absences, irritations and the inexplicable loyalty. Plus, they occasionally have hot sex. ('Made a mess of you again,' says Pia.)

The title is a clue to the book's central concern. *Contrapposto* is the classical pose in which the body's weight rests unevenly; balance achieved through asymmetry. The novel is interested in exactly those slightly off-centre arrangements that constitute any adult life: art vs commerce; solitude vs companionship; talent vs discipline. Few of us – even the mighty Eggers, presumably – ever stand entirely upright.

Of course, the trouble with art about artists – novels, films, plays, take your pick – is that it tends to oscillate between reverence and satire. Either art redeems everything or artists are insufferable frauds; or, occasionally, both. (For a recent example, see Ian McKellen's Lucian Freud-y turn in *The Christophers*.) Fortunately, Eggers has more than enough experience of the creative industries to avoid the easy and the obvious and focuses instead on the stubborn human need to just make things, however foolishly.

I won't reveal the plot but suffice it to say that success in the end for Cricket is entirely beside the point. Fame, after all, is fleeting. Markets fluctuate. Reputations evaporate. The making alone remains: the colour harmonies, the pigment loads, the work.

The book's greatest strength is undoubtedly Eggers's understated comic gift: it's almost as if every page ends with a little raised eyebrow and a shrug. There are wonderfully observed scenes in art schools, galleries and at exhibitions, where everyone is trying, with varying degrees of desperation, to appear as though they understand what the hell is going on.

There are also a couple of weaknesses. First, there's the determination carefully to observe and note everything, as if the writer were a painter, which at times veers close to self-parody:

> Silas's twin bed was next to his chair. Usually the bed was tidy, befitting a former navy midshipman, but today it lay unmade, the plaid wool blanket still at a ragged diagonal.

Eggers certainly knows how to paint a scene, but there is such a thing as too much information.

The second problem is the book's sheer

Having abandoned the pyrotechnics of his early books, Eggers is now busy pondering the meaning of life

scale. Four hundred-plus pages is a generous canvas for any artist. Occasionally that generosity becomes a little diffuse and blurry: certain episodes feel less dramatically necessary than emotionally necessary for the author. A self-portrait of the artist, perhaps – in a very large, convex mirror.

Still, the overall effect is both deeply pleasing and delightfully, depressingly true to life: the fond recounting of old, odd, pointless conversations, embarrassing enthusiasms and people who disappear for 20 years and then unexpectedly return. Like *contrapposto* itself, the novel finds its balance by refusing easy symmetry. It leans a little one way and then the other; off-centre, out of kilter, alive.

Buried in the bog

Lee Langley

The Red Mouth
by Sheila Armstrong
Bloomsbury, £16.99, pp. 232

Sheila Armstrong's strange and beautiful novel has 12 chapters, each named for a month of the year – though not always the same year or even the same decade. The author plunges us into archaeology, history, geology and complex human relationships. Time is fluid here: we might encounter an obscure neolithic weapon or stumble on a beer can left by a thoughtless 21st-century rambler. Occasionally Irish words dance across the page.

The Red Mouth – an beal rua – introduces us to a group of strangers whose lives are linked by an Irish peat bog that yields long-buried evidence of past lives: an antler from an extinct species of deer, or an Iron Age woman, throat slashed, a rope around her neck, body curled into the shape of a question mark. The dark power of the bog itself is at the heart of the story.

Alongside the land we explore the people whose lives intersect and overlap like tangled roots: the oddly named Patch, out for a walk, who on a whim takes possession of the hidden antler, an action that changes his life; Tomas, the peat-cutter, whose blade uncovers the body of the mysterious woman; Fleming, the archaeologist, who uses the discovery as a career-changing opportunity; and his two small daughters, dragged along in the wake of their ambitious father. Vulnerable, they will be damaged in different ways. The pains of parenthood and sibling conflict are explored with tenderness and wry humour; the sadness of a marriage disintegrating while love stubbornly endures. Over the years, we get to know these people and the heartbreak of their lives. The bog is ever-present: drained, rewetted, exploited, flooded, threaded with iron-fed streams that carry a scarlet stain.

The seasons change: in July – *Iuil* – 'the sky is iced cornflower, refracted through the glassy air into purple heath milkwort, dozing yellow tormentil and beaded red sundews'. By August – *Lunasa* – everything has changed. The bog threatens, 'furious and greedy... black as gangrene'. Wildfires break out and blaze. In December – *Nollaig* – the only colour left is in the dense mat of sphagnum moss that 'grows faster than it decomposes: death below; life above'. The author has an almost physical intimacy with nature and landscape: sensuous, rhapsodic, calling to mind Seamus Heaney's 'bog poems'.

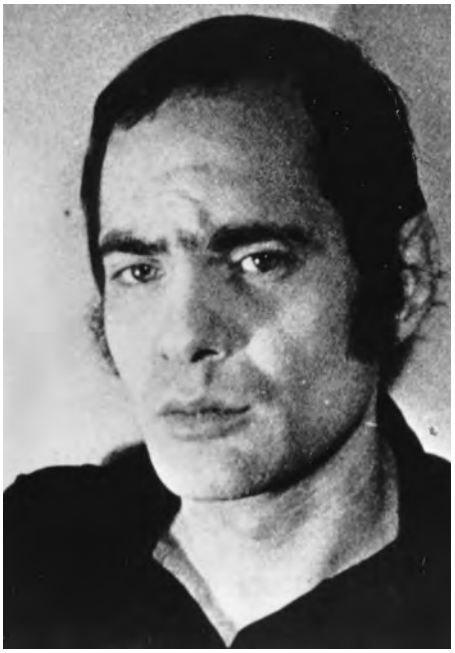
The Red Mouth blends ancient savagery with modern life, deftly referencing the Troubles, domestic conflict, industrial greed and pollution. Armstrong's previous books –

a novel and short stories – have been finalists for numerous prizes. Glowing accolades from critics and fellow writers have put her at the forefront of today's young Irish writers.

Radical chic

Jason Burke

Storm and Silence: A Memoir
by Astrid Proll, with Boris von Brauchitsch, translated by Shane Anderson
Isolarii, £18, pp. 184


GETTY IMAGES

ALAMY

Andreas Baader in Stammheim Prison in 1977; Astrid Proll after her arrest in London in 1978

In the summer of 1970, a group of West German radical activists flew from Berlin to the Middle East. They wanted to acquire the necessary skills to launch a campaign of urban warfare against what they considered to be the fascist regime in their homeland. This would be their contribution to the global struggle against imperialism and capitalism that they believed was under way worldwide.

Thousands of western European left-wing activists travelled to the Middle East out of sympathy with the Palestinian nationalist cause in the late 1960s. Most returned after a few weeks with suntans, a keffiyeh and a book of poetry, in the words of one jaded foreign correspondent; but a minority convinced their hosts to upgrade the standard tour of refugee camps, clinics and schools to include actual military training. The West Germans fell into the latter category and spent six weeks or so in a training camp in Jordan, just north of Amman. This was run by Fatah, the biggest militant Palestinian group at the time, and dedicated to the 'armed struggle' against Israel.

Astrid Proll, then 23, was one of the travellers to Jordan. In *Storm and Silence*, she describes the many miscommunications and culture clashes that marred relations with their hosts. On arrival, Andreas Baader, whose arrogance infuriated almost everyone, vetoed the segregation of men and women as was customary in the socially conservative environment of even the relatively secular camps run by Fatah. He demanded extra ammunition, which was expensive, after the West Germans had shot off their entire allocation with abandon; dismissed as useless the rigorous physical drills that were routine for trainees; and refused early morning exercise.

The spartan conditions were onerous, too, and the visitors' desire for comfortable beds and fresh fruit, both notably absent, grew. They also argued among themselves, though Proll does not mention the incident which convinced their hosts to send them home: an effort to persuade the Palestinians that one of their number was an Israeli spy, who should be executed.

Back in West Germany, the group's primary propagandist, Ulrike Meinhof, a former high-profile radical journalist of significant intellect and profound commitment, sat at a typewriter in a safehouse and, fuelled by cigarettes and coffee, tapped out the manifesto of the new group – now called the Red Army Faction (RAF).

The campaign that the group then launched was squalid and shortlived. It started with a series of bank robberies. At a push, these could be understood to be attacks on capitalism, Proll writes, but were, she admits, really motivated by pragmatic considerations. Clandestine life was expensive, especially if you wanted luxuries. Gudrun Ensslin, the clever, capable, dogmatic co-founder of the RAF, took her lover Baader shopping at 'bourgeois' stores, and the shirts she bought him to be dry-cleaned.

Proll admits that a stolen silver-grey Alfa Romeo Giulia may not have been the ideal car for an urban guerrilla

Proll's account of her life in the RAF is artless and somewhat fragmentary. She was an early recruit and present at many important moments. On the whole, she appears an honest narrator, which makes her story a valuable addition to the already extensive literature on West German extremism in the 1970s. But it is frustrating that, when it comes to some of the most interesting and important episodes that she witnessed, or indeed may have played a key role in, she retreats into a discussion of secondary sources.

She was caught in May 1971, recognised by a sharp-eyed garage attendant who had clearly been carefully scrutinising the wanted posters that had gone up all over West Germany bearing mugshots of fugitive RAF members. In this book she admits that a stolen silver-grey Alfa Romeo Giulia might not have been the best choice of vehicle for a clandestine 'urban guerrilla'. Baader was caught the following year after driving an aubergine Porsche Targa the wrong way down a one-way street at 4 a.m. The arrest of Meinhof and Ensslin followed.

The RAF was eventually responsible for 34 deaths, with most coming as the group sought to free its incarcerated leaders. The violence peaked in 1977, when a series of spectacular attacks failed, leading Ensslin and Baader to commit suicide in their cells. Proll remembers little debate about the rights and wrongs of murder. This may have been true when she was active, but there are other accounts which give detailed descriptions of bitter arguments over exactly this issue. At the end of the book, she admits that the RAF's 'methods were not the right ones' and calls for 'new forms of resistance'.

Perhaps the most enjoyable pages are those describing Proll's time in London, where she arrived in 1974 after absconding when a West German judge ordered her temporary release on grounds of ill-health during her trial for attempted murder. She ended up working as a car mechanic in Hackney, where she felt 'at home in that desolate backdrop of a slowly fading city'. This allows the reader a glimpse of a much-parodied world of political activism, alternative lifestyles and experimentation. Proll remembers: 'In the 1970s it was very much the vogue to leave your husband and get into a lesbian relationship as an act of deepened feminist radicalisation.'

Though awkward questions were usually deflected by her false marriage to Robin Puttick and the 'reserved politeness' of the Brit-

ish, Proll's past eventually caught up with her and, despite a vociferous campaign by supporters, she was extradited back to West Germany in 1979. Times had changed. The RAF had become 'a fashion item, a symbol of radical chic', rather than an existential threat, and she served out a relatively short sentence uneventfully before release and rehabilitation. 'I was incredibly lucky,' she writes.

Crime fiction

The Germans are coming

Andrew Rosenheim

Do novelists need credentials? Once, almost a century ago, the vogue for hard-boiled fiction meant that in the masculine Hemingway hegemony then holding sway, novelists needed to be graduates of the 'University of Life'. Writers, it was argued, had to spend their apprenticeship riding the rails, tending bar in tough-guy saloons and doing almost any work that could be described as manual labour.

This changed postwar, with greater affluence and millions more people in higher education, including women. Among them were a growing number taking postgraduate degrees in creative writing – most famously at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, but followed quite credibly in this country at the University of East Anglia.

What, then, to make of a writer who flouts these conventions, appearing with a first novel at the age of 65, without a university degree or any DEI affiliations? An Old Etonian, moreover, who has spent 20 years in the army, followed by ten as an equerry and private secretary to the royal family? All I can say is that Jamie Lowther-Pinkerton's *When Love and Loyalty Collide* (Bantam, £16.99) defeated all my cynical expectations. It is a very good read – intelligently structured, well-written and candid when candour is called for (there are many violent scenes and a few explicit sexual encounters).

The story has two protagonists, male and female. The heroine, Missie Ormesby, is English, but she grew up in India speaking fluent German, thanks to her German governess. She is strong-willed and impetuous, and ends up being sent to Le Rosier, a finishing school in the Swiss Alps. Life there is generally cossetted, but in 1938 danger is in the air, and the BBC brings the girls news each day of an increasingly perilous world.

At Le Rosier, Missie becomes friends with a German girl, Anna Friedrich, and is introduced to the Friedrich family in Munich. After she fails to rebuff the aggressive sexual advances of Anna's brother, Franz, she is saved only by the intervention of Franz's friend, the anti-Nazi Conrad von Echlau. When, next day, Conrad quarrels on the street with a group of hostile Brownshirts, Missie returns the favour and saves him from a potentially lethal beating.

The connection between Missie and Conrad is immediate and strong, and the two soon become lovers. But Conrad recognises that their differing nationalities mean that their love affair can only be tenuous, and reluctantly Missie sees this too: 'There was no hope. There never had been, not with the way the world was headed.' Faced with the certainty of heartbreak, Conrad breaks off the relationship.

The book then jumps to the wartime of 1940. Drafted into the Luftwaffe, Conrad is involved in a plan to destroy the British radar defences that are thwarting the German air attacks. Meanwhile, in England, Missie is conscripted, thanks to her fluent German, and sent to Bletchley Park to help the Enigma decoding efforts. As a result of an indiscreet slip by the Germans, Missie and her colleagues uncover a plot to land troops near the British radar headquarters at Bawdsey in Suffolk – one that involves Conrad.

This is not a novel full of surprises, and for most of it we await what seems the inevitable convergence of Missie and Conrad's respective efforts. But the wait is never burdensome and the story never flags. The author manages to convey often highly detailed information, even of a military sort, in a way that is always clear and often illuminating. He says he has used his mother's activities in the war as the basis for his story, but he has also clearly done a tremendous amount of research and handles everything – from the topography of the Suffolk coast near Shingle Street to the interior decoration of Göring's palatial hunting lodge – with the assurance of an accomplished veteran novelist. The only question remaining after such a strong debut is what Lowther-Pinkerton will write next.

Danger is in the air, and the BBC brings news every day of an increasingly perilous world

The narrative of *Mad Mabel* (Macmillan, £16.99), by Sally Hepworth, is related by an 81-year-old woman who lives on a quiet street in Melbourne. A little cranky and very strong-willed, Mabel nonetheless gets along with her neighbours fairly well – with the exception of her nemesis, Ishaan, and his 'deranged chihuahua'. When Ishaan drops dead in his kitchen, word somehow gets out that Mabel is not the innocent old lady she appears but a convicted murderer who has done time.

It takes the length of the book before it's confirmed that she is indeed a murderer, as well as identifying who she has killed and why. But the humour and zest of the narrative means the deferral is painless; and we also learn of several other deaths involving her as her story unspools.

We are now so accustomed to unreliable narrators that it takes some time to recognise that Mabel, in her account of her life, is in all but one respect as straight as a die – unlike the other characters who constitute the attractively wacky but credible cast. They include her lifelong best friend Daphne, who provides the largest surprise; Pete the Greek, who has ties to Mabel which only gradually emerge; the litigious Joan, whom Mabel tries to avoid; and the seven-year-old Persephone, an obnoxious, precocious child, who gradually works her way into Mabel's heart. The narrative alternates between a potted history of Mabel's past and the ongoing events of life on her street. The book is part comedy, part thriller and entirely engaging.

No. 1 St James's Park (Scribner UK, £20) is Alan Judd's second novel in a planned series of historical espionage thrillers set initially during the first world war. It can be profitably read on its own, but we have a richer sense of Judd's heroine, Emily Grey, from reading both books.

Here Grey is working on secondment in a hut in St James's Park when she is summoned to MI6's Whitehall headquarters. An agent in Bern, nicknamed Fritz the Ritz, has information on German industrial production that is potentially of considerable value. But the officer in charge of running him has been exposed and therefore withdrawn by the British – who now need Grey (a fluent German speaker) to take over until a permanent officer can be found.

Once in Switzerland, Grey quickly discovers that Fritz the Ritz is peddling information that could easily be culled from published sources, and that in some cases he has simply made things up. His exposure results in other discoveries, including a British embassy official who is selling classified information and blank British passports, and a couple (a British man named Rutland and his German wife) who want to help him do so. Grey has a sidekick, Nigel Nisbet, whom she finds annoying, though his keenness on her becomes apparent as the story progresses.

The writing throughout is unshowy but clear, and the descriptions are often sharpened by Judd's sly sense of humour. There is a particularly funny scene when Grey masquerades as a *poule de luxe* (without much *luxe*) to keep Rutland from leaving the country.

Judd has shown himself a dab hand at virtually every kind of espionage fiction, and some may think it a pity that the historical genre does not make use of his deep knowledge of present-day spying. But this series shows an aptitude for research and a pleasing restraint in its application, while still giving an intimate sense of the settings of an earlier era. I look forward to further volumes featuring Emily Grey.

ART MEDIA/PRINT COLLECTOR/GETTY IMAGES

'Aristotle Before the Bust of Homer', by Rembrandt van Rijn, 1653

The siege and the journey

Philip Womack

Homer Haunted: The Many Afterlives of an Ancient Poet
by Henry Power
Bloomsbury, £25, pp. 342

Homer's ghost is particularly busy, popping up in the dreams of pretty much every poet going. In fact if you are a poet and haven't been visited by Homer, you may find yourself wondering why you've been left out.

The cultural reach of the two major poems that appear under Homer's name – the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* – is undeniable. I teach my creative writing students that there are only two stories: the siege and the journey, and there they are, right at the beginning of literary history. They've been read continuously for centuries. On my shelves is an edition of Alexander Pope's *Iliad* which belonged to my great-great-great-grandfather, in which are still bits of paper put in by subsequent family members. These days, social media is awash with comments on Emily Wilson's translation, or the latest film by Christopher Nolan.

Henry Power's engaging and witty book describes how and why Homer has been received and transmuted over the centuries: how translators grappled with problems of alienation from the subject matter; how their circumstances affected their practice; and how each subsequent translator or adapter used the work of those who had gone before. The book's title comes from the poet Michael Longley, who had been 'Homer-haunted for 50 years'. Power (Homer-haunted, too, since the age of eight) read Classics and English at Oxford and draws the reader on through the tale with aplomb.

He contends that Homer was not a single poet but 'the tradition that generated these poems', seeing them as containing multitudes of voices. Fair enough; but I'm with the poet A.E. Stallings on this: there is a controlling poetic intelligence which imposes unity on the whole. The *Iliad* is about the transfer of bodies, beginning with the priest Chryses asking for his daughter back, and ending with Priam bringing his dead son Hector home. It is hard to believe that such mirrorings came about by committee.

There are lots of pleasing nuggets, such as that Lucian of Samosata claimed to have descended to the underworld to meet Homer. On Lucian asking the poet why he'd begun the *Iliad* with Achilles's wrath, Homer answered: 'It was the first thing that popped into my head.' In a later chapter on Matthew Arnold, I learned that Cardinal Newman's younger brother was 'the first (and so far only) person to translate *Robinson Crusoe* into Latin'. (You can find it online; it's fab.)

I hadn't known that the first translation of the *Iliad* was in 1526 – into modern Greek, by Nikolaos Loukanis; nor that before George Chapman's masterful 16th-century English version, the MP Arthur Hall had made a 'faltering attempt'. This is how he rendered the opening lines:

> I thee beseech, O Goddess mild, the hateful hate to plain,
> Whereby Achilles was so wrong, and grew in such disdain.

You can see why it didn't catch on.

Chapman translated Homer for money – as a second son, Power notes, he inherited £100 and two spoons. His version, so important to John Keats,

> brings Homer home... Nausicaa plays cricket on the beach... Agamemnon kicks a severed head like a football... Odysseus visits his father on the allotment and finds him wearing 'thornproof hedging mittens'.

Pope, unlike Chapman, became a millionaire from his Homeric translations, even hiring two lesser poets to help him with the titanic task. And it's his version rather than Chapman's that proved most popular over the years, despite its reputation for not capturing the poem's 'wildness'. Power defends Pope, noting that he in fact popularised the notion of Homer's 'otherness', and all he was doing was attempting, like Chapman, to suit the poem to his own times.

The account of Keats's engagement with the *Iliad* is enthralling, and Power's exegesis of 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer' opens it up in original ways.

As Power takes us through the 20th century and on, the book quickens pace. We positively hurtle through H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt*, Ezra Pound's *The Cantos*, Christopher Logue's innovative deployment of collage in *War Music*, Thom Gunn's homoerotics, and Derek Walcott's post-colonial approach in *Omeros*. David Melnick's homophonic version, which uses the sounds of Homeric Greek ('Men in Aïda, they appeal, eh? A day, O Achilles!' is the first line), seems inventive but crazy. It was fun to learn about Stallings's obsession with Homeric equids, and I would have liked more on Alice Oswald's mysterious, vatic *Memorial*, which foregrounds the similes for which Homer is so celebrated, alongside the deaths of all the soldiers.

I don't agree with everything that Power suggests. That Polyphemus is the victim of the colonising Odysseus seems particularly far-fetched, as the Cyclopes were not peace-loving farmers, but attacked their neighbours, the Phaeacians. Also, Polyphemus is quite clearly monstrous. Throughout, though, Power is a highly sensitive and winningly inquisitive reader. He has lucidly synthesised masses of texts and has shown that we can never lay Homer's ghost to rest. And why would we, when he contains such multitudes?

ARTS

Ballet royale

Rupert Christiansen on Britain's most unabashedly elitist school

As we ponder the ups and downs of our sporting record this summer, it might be worth noting our unquestioned prowess when it comes to the demands of classically based dancing. The Royal Ballet is consistently more than a match for any comparable company in the world, and its chief feeder, the Royal Ballet School, currently celebrating its centenary, is similarly and solidly rated as one of the two or three best of its kind anywhere.

Both these institutions are deeply beholden to tradition, and the RBS might well be the most unabashedly elitist educational establishment in the country. It receives globally more than 2,500 applications a year. All these will lead to an audition, the number finally whittled down to 30-odd offers of a full-time place. For a nice change, merit and potential are strictly the only criteria in a rigorous selection process (entirely misrepresented in the film and musical *Billy Elliot*). About half the 200-odd students, entering between the ages of 11 and 18, are British citizens. The great majority receive substantial scholarships, financed via the government and private donors.

The RBS is divided between a junior section housed in White Lodge in Richmond Park and a senior section next to the Royal Opera House; recent inspection reports are highly favourable, both academically and pastorally – 'all the relevant standards are met' – and it undoubtedly comes up with the goods, inasmuch as virtually all its final-year graduates end up with a professional placement.

The RBS is, however, extremely defensive of its reputation and cagey about granting outsiders access. In the recent past there have been accusations that the draconian drill and repetition necessary to instil balletic technique can degenerate into thoughtless cruelty. The stress and competition certainly gets dangerously intense, particularly for children who aren't maturing physically in the right way and for their own good need to be periodically 'assessed out' – in other words, required to leave. Close watch is kept for eating disorders, always prevalent among teenage girls, but especially so among aspiring ballerinas. Given the amount of close contact dance involves, safeguarding is a sensitive matter.

The Royal Ballet School is not a place for cissies: nobody there is going to be mollycoddled

Five years ago, in the wake of the hushed-up suicide of the choreographer Liam Scarlett, these and other issues were discomfortingly aired in a whistle-blowing article by Luke Jennings in the *London Review of Books*, followed in 2023 by a BBC Panorama documentary, luridly entitled *The Dark Side of Ballet Schools*. The evidence presented included submissions by some who simply hadn't made the grade, and there was a whiff of sour grapes in their accounts of the way they had been bullied and demoralised. But the RBS is not a place for cissies: nobody there is going to be mollycoddled.

Leadership today is tripartite. A CEO administrates, while a headmaster oversees standard academic education (students sit up to eight GCSEs and later a BA in dance, validated by the University of Roehampton; a few opt to take an A level too). At the apex, however, is the artistic director, who manages a training programme that prepares students to enter international companies at 18 or 19. In the past, emphases in the curriculum have been the source of considerable friction, as school directors such as Dame Merle Park and Gailene Stock have promoted ideas that didn't align with what the Royal Ballet – the school's primary tar-

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Students of the Royal Ballet School in Christening Suite by Christopher Wheeldon

get – required. The present incumbent is Iain Mackay, himself once a student at the RBS and a former principal of Birmingham Royal Ballet. Only two years into the job, he is both personable and plausible, but he has already made a radical change that could have a far-reaching impact. (He refused a request for an interview.)

As from this autumn, the school will raise its starting point for full-time boarders from 11 to 12. Year 7 students will train through a new network of regional hubs, building on existing schemes. Presumably this is partly a money-saving exercise, but more crucially, it means both less immersive training and (perhaps) better balanced psyches. What it means for the development of young bodies is the big question. The top Russian ballet schools whip ten-year-olds into an almost vacation-free boarding programme, resulting in physiques that are much looser and steelier than ours, leading to lower injury rates as well as almost militaristic dedication to the cause. The RBS schooling, broadly speaking, tends to produce elegant and musical dancers, notable for fast footwork, whereas the Russians score for athleticism, supple backs and a brilliant jump – the serpentine ballerina Svetlana Zakharova being exemplary.

Every summer the school showcases all its students in public performances at the theatre in Holland Park and a matinée at the Royal Opera House. I saw this year's cohort at Holland Park, where they play in an open-sided tent. To the last they coped like troupers with the sweltering heat, as they did with deafening recorded music.

The new artistic director has already made a radical change that could have a far-reaching impact

A centenary programme honoured the school's past, including short works modestly tailored to flatter teenagers' abilities, choreographed by alumni David Bintley, Jessica Lang and Christopher Wheeldon. Most memorable was a fantasy subtly imagined by Cathy Marston, in which former ballerina and RBS student Deborah Bull – now Baroness Bull, deputy speaker of the House of Lords, for heaven's sake – makes a ghostly visit to a rehearsal studio where the sight of young dancers limbering up revives all the dreams and fears of her own distant childhood. Fascinating though it was to see extracts from the 1937 chessboard drama *Checkmate* by RBS's founder Ninette de Valois the young dancers failed to convey its brutal, fascistic overtones.

Throughout the boys produced clean line, bounce and bravado: plenty of virility there, almost to a fault. The neat and tidy girls seemed to be holding back something – sensuality? You didn't feel them inside the music, dancing through it: they're simply on or off the beat. Ballet, of course, has a deep aesthetic root in parade-ground discipline, but I was more immediately reminded of a conversation I had some years back with a

Royal Ballet dancer who had retired young and gone into acting. ‘All the training at the school was about following the rules and doing what you were told’, was the gist of what he said. ‘When I joined the company and got on stage, the coaches kept telling me to express some personality. What personality? At the school, I had never been allowed to feel that I had any.’

That elusive individuality and allure was found only in Alecsia Maria Lazarescu, who lit up a pas de deux in Bintley’s neoclassical confection. Remember her name. But plaudits are also due to Samantha Striplin for an impeccable round of fouettés in Act Three of *Swan Lake*; to Fabrizzio Ulloa Cornejo for buoyancy and charm; and to Millan de Benito for sensitive partnering. All except Striplin have been signed up to the Royal Ballet for next season, along with three others.

A second programme, focused on years 7 to 11, was both exhilarating and poignant. Exhilarating, because of all the youthful hope, energy and commitment evident in a jolly suite from *Coppélia* and in short new works about climate change and

Perhaps ballet schools could usefully draw lessons from the football academy system

so forth that the youngsters had choreographed themselves. Poignant, because in these slender and immature bodies talent lies in embryo and one is painfully aware that only a handful will make it through to parturition.

The RBS seems to be doing a fine job at fulfilling its core mission of producing technically competent, resourceful and biddable dancers. Matthew Paluch, a former RBS student and distinguished teacher, thinks that this is all it can reasonably be expected to do. ‘Nobody leaving school at 18 should be assumed to be the finished article. How much experience of life will you have had? You could say that RBS graduates are beautiful blank canvases. Isn’t it up to the companies they join to develop their artistic sensibilities further?’

But there remains a dearth of intelligent dancers with rich imaginations, exuding the personality that my old friend felt had been crushed out of him. Perhaps ballet schools could usefully draw lessons from the way that teenage football prodigies such as Jude Bellingham have been nurtured through an academy system and the Elite Player Performance Plan: if we are to retain our global standing in the field, the thinking needs to range wider and deeper.

The Royal Ballet School Summer Performance 2026 *is on 18 July.* A Centenary Celebration *is at the Royal Opera House from 8 to 10 October*.

Exhibitions

Worst in show

Digby Warde-Aldam

Lindsey Mendick: Where You End And I Begin
Carl Freedman Gallery, Margate, until 30 August

To Improvise a Mountain: Lynette Yiadom-Boakye Curates
De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea, until 13 September

Jack White: These Thoughts May Disappear
Newport Street Gallery, until 13 September

I love my friends at the loucher fringes of the art world, but every now and again, someone does something so obviously stupid that it calls certain such ties into question. Last week, a pal’s poor judgment engendered a *Salo*-grade spectacle so nightmarish that I can’t bring myself to elaborate. Suffice to say: some parties present will never shake off the trauma; and that the instigator was extremely lucky to avoid castration.

It gets worse, too. I’d just returned from Margate, where I’d spent ages taking notes on the locale’s second-most-famous artist: a noisy, blue-haired ceramicist called Lindsey Mendick (*b*.1987). Mendick is fluent in the art-historical resonances and material subtleties of her chosen medium. And on a technical level, her art is significantly more accomplished than anything Grayson Perry has produced of late; it is also a lot more annoying.

Her current exhibition is broadly concerned with romantic attachment, specifically Mendick’s own bond with her husband and her dog. A lot of money and thought has gone into it, but it nevertheless sees the artist play to her worst tendencies: her tendency to crowd pieces with zany, quasi-surrealist detail; and her apparent compulsion to overshare.

There are vases sprouting hands, puckered lips and, in one instance, a relief of a slack-jawed male face for ever paralysed at the moment of orgasm. There are ceramic sex toys and recreations of the artist’s dirty polaroids; disembodied fragments of plaster carrying conjoined likenesses of the couple, their faces and groins contorted, stretched and deformed to grotesque proportions. It’s all deeply personal and, for art that aspires to surrealism, weirdly literal-minded. Mendick has clearly felt an Emin-like urge to disclose the most intimate details of her private life, which to most of us won’t be very interesting. In other words I hated the show. Mostly because it embodies everything I hate about British art

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND CARL FREEDMAN GALLERY, MARGATE. PHOTOGRAPHY: OLLIE HARROP

but also because I sense that, with a bit of editing, Mendick might well produce something genuinely interesting.

Further down the coast, Bexhill’s De La Warr pavilion is currently playing host to a so-so touring show that nevertheless contains some fabulous moments. Its curator is the painter Lynette Yiadom-Boakye (*b*.1977), whose ambiguous, wilfully anach-

Her ceramics are more accomplished than anything Grayson Perry has produced of late – and more annoying

ronistic portraits of imaginary black figures long ago became a fixture of blue-chip collections. Her own works are hung – ‘in conversation’ – among pieces by her heroes and contemporaries, and not much of it makes any sense.

The major exception comes with a handful of pictures by Walter Sickert that look superb in the context – and return the compliment to Yiadom-Boakye’s own paintings. Looking at a terrifically murky Sickert self-portrait here, you start to realise quite how

Lindsey Mendick's surreal pots at Carl Freedman Gallery, Margate

closely his admirer has studied his efforts, consciously mimicking her forebear's rough brush strokes and palette, as well as the unreadable, glowering intensity of his subjects' expressions.

Back in London, I get the distinct sense that the art dealers have already switched to high-summer autopilot. So it was that I ended up at the Newport Street Gallery, at once a fabulous space and the capital's most ludicrous cultural institution. It's essentially a private museum belonging to Damien Hirst, who opened it to great fanfare in 2015 and initially staged some fun shows of works from his own, vast collection. The quality dropped off and Hirst handed curatorial duties to his son.

Its latest non-event of an exhibition is a showcase for the art of the musician Jack White, formerly of garage-rock duo the White Stripes. Back in his early-2000s heyday, White displayed a distinct and mildly creepy aesthetic sensibility, one that somehow met the twain between the formal purity of Mondrian and the unplaceable unease of Grant Wood's 'American Gothic'. I couldn't for the life of me envisage a situation in which White's show might be any good, but I held vague hopes that it might at least be entertaining.

It isn't, and I don't recommend it. White has variously installed a gargantuan, traffic light-red sculpture of a tree in the gallery's stairwell; turned a load of wooden palettes into platforms for some lame assemblages; and commissioned an army of sculptures based on a charity-shop figurine of a ukelele-strumming hillbilly. You could cruise through the show in ten minutes, or you could – as I did, out of duty – spend a full two hours therein. It wouldn't make the slightest difference to your appreciation of an inert show still far from being the gallery's worst.

None of this bothered me remotely, but I do suspect that Hirst and Son could use the building and its excellent exhibition spaces for purposes more useful. I realise that planning applications may be a concern, but they could, for instance, repurpose it as a studio complex for emerging artists. They could also follow the smart money and torch the place, pocketing a hefty insurance payout in the process.

Classical music

Haydn seek

Damian Thompson

I've been listening to a symphony that I would describe as an almost perfect masterpiece by a composer of towering importance. But until last month I'd never heard it. Most music-lovers would struggle to identify the piece; most orchestras have never performed it and have no plans to do so.

We can only be talking about a symphony by Joseph Haydn. He wrote 104 of them, plus two or three others that didn't make it into the catalogue. For that reason alone there aren't going to be many opportunities to hear the less popular ones. Which raises the question: what makes a Haydn symphony popular?

The short answer is: a nickname. That's not surprising. The *Farewell*, the *Hen*, the *Clock* and the *Military* play tricks that invite affectionate titles. More significantly, they reveal a miraculous juxtaposition of melody and counterpoint unsurpassed by any composer in the history of music. But then so do dozens of other Haydn symphonies without nicknames.

Which brings me to No. 76 in E flat major. Where has this been all my life? Sitting under my nose in boxed sets that I've been too lazy to investigate properly. My excuse, not a very good one, is that it doesn't seem to be on anyone's radar. Unless you're seriously into Haydn, if you discover No. 76 it's likely to be by accident, perhaps served up by a streaming algorithm.

There is no substitute for No. 76. Your understanding of Haydn is incomplete until you hear it

If so, it will be a very happy accident. The first movement grabs us not with a melody but with a minuscule dotted rhythm (dum-di-DUM). The effect is both carefree and restless – a very Haydnesque combination, and one that so fascinated Robert Simpson that he copied and pasted it into the explosive Scherzo of his Fourth Symphony.

This fleeting motif, heard only in the opening Allegro, flavours all four movements of No. 76. Haydn may not have invented the symphony, but he was the first composer to create thematic and emotional correspondences between their movements. He does this again and again, yet the sum of the parts is always different. There is no substitute for No. 76. Your understanding of Haydn is incomplete until you hear it, and since that won't be in concert you need to pick the right recording.

Unfortunately that's easier said than

done. The natural place to encounter the lesser-known symphonies is in complete cycles, three of which – by Christopher Hogwood, Roy Goodman and Derek Solomons – were begun in the 1980s but had the plug pulled on them when the money ran out. Max Goberman's pioneering cycle died with him in 1962; the late Thomas Fey's set with the Heidelberg Symphony Orchestra had to be completed by others after he suffered a horrific brain injury in 2014.

There are only four Haydn cycles under a single conductor. The first, by Ernst Maerzendorfer and the Vienna Chamber Orchestra, is a historical curiosity that survives in damaged transfers from LPs. Adam Fischer's with the Austro-Hungarian Haydn Orchestra drowns the 'London' symphonies in Nimbus's sonic mud. Dennis Russell Davies and the Stuttgart Chamber Orchestra sound as if they're sight-reading. That leaves Antal Dorati and the Philharmonia Hungarica, whose stately but eloquent readings were captured in glowing Decca sound that has just been given extra polish in a new remastering. Alas, you can rely on Decca to screw up its boxed sets, and this one is currently no longer available on Amazon; apparently it sold out on pre-orders. Meanwhile, the thrilling but divisive period-instrument readings in Giovanni Antonini's Haydn 2032 project are, as the name suggests, some years off completion. So where does that leave us?

Back to Symphony No. 76. The finale, with its swooping grace-notes, bursts with joie de vivre. Here, Dorati is too slow. My top recommendation of available recordings would be Johannes Klumpp, who stepped in to finish Fey's cycle. His performance has a lovely bounce, though there's too much period-style fiddling with dynamics.

But note that I said available recordings. For the past decade, Norichika Iimori has been recording all the Haydn symphonies with the Japan Century Symphony Orchestra. He has nearly finished. These are wonderfully transparent modern-instrument readings by a conductor whose feel for Haydn's arches and pauses gives us a near-ideal balance of pathos and wit. In the finale of No. 76, the ornaments fly past like feathers in the wind.

In short, Iimori's Haydn symphonies are the equivalent of Suzuki's Bach cantatas with the Bach Collegium Japan: a new benchmark – but with one infuriating difference. Suzuki was on Bis, based in Sweden; Iimori is on Exton, which like most Japanese labels makes its recordings only sporadically available to Westerners at monstrous expense. These are the most consistently fine performances of the most important body of orchestral music ever written, yet there hasn't been a single review in *Gramophone* or *Fanfare*. Why? Because you can't buy the bloody things. Unbelievable.

Matt Damon (centre) as Odysseus in Christopher Nolan's The Odyssey

Cinema

Troy story

Deborah Ross

The Odyssey
15, Nationwide

The Odyssey is Christopher Nolan's relentless, deafening three-hour take on Homer's epic poem, and while it is technically impressive filmmaking – Imax cameras; massive mechanical puppets, minimally pimped up by CGI; thousands of extras – it is set piece after set piece which becomes rather tiring. Even if weariness is part of the point of the *Odyssey*, it's no excuse for the film being tiring.

What we get is an action blockbuster, without significant depth, although there is some heft to the final act – everybody's favourite act, surely. Who doesn't love it when Odysseus finally makes it back to Ithaca disguised as a beggar and no one recognises him? (I have always wondered if he was, perhaps, the inspiration for Mrs Doubtfire.)

I am no expert on the *Odyssey* but, don't panic, the experts are sure to be all over it. Even before it was released, Nolan was being criticised for deploying modern vernacular ('mum', 'dad', 'fuck off!') and for some of his casting choices, like getting Lupita Nyong'o to play Helen of Troy. This, claimed Elon Musk, 'desecrated Homer'. Shall I break it to him or will you? That Matt Damon, who plays Odysseus, is an American from the Cambridge, Massachusetts, area? Best you do it, I think. I've lost the appetite for such stupid arguments. Plus, Nyong'o is wonderful.

Even if weariness is part of the point of the Odyssey, it's no excuse for the film being tiring

On to the story… As you probably know, the epic follows King Odysseus of Ithaca on his ten-year quest to return home from the Trojan war to his loyal wife Penelope (Anne Hathaway) and son Telemachus (Tom Holland). She has to fight off multiple suitors, while her husband has to survive monsters, mythical beasts, angry gods, sirens and a ton of bad weather.

It follows the narrative reasonably closely (as far as I can gather) but, this being Nolan,

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it's not entirely chronological. Flashbacks are heavily deployed. Beyond that, there's, thankfully, no funny business. Those who are not familiar with the original work may often find it confusing. Who exactly is Sinon (Elliot Page)? And remind me again of the story behind Helen of Troy's husband? And why does Athena (Zendaya, who gets top billing, even though she's only in it for two minutes, tops) keep popping up as and when? On the god front we also have Circe (Samantha Morton) and Calypso (Charlize Theron) but no Zeus and no Poseidon stirring up the seas with his trident. They exist as unseen, elemental forces of nature. This isn't *Jason and the Argonauts*.

There are some tremendous scenes, many of which wouldn't be amiss in a horror movie. There's Circe turning Odysseus's men into pigs, while the Cyclops – a 40ft animatronic puppet that's given life by actor Bill Irwin – is truly terrifying. The costuming is excellent, as is the 35ft-high Trojan horse, which, for once, doesn't look as if it's been hastily banged up by a group of schoolkids for a woodwork project.

The deafening, relentless soundtrack, meanwhile, composed by Ludwig Goransson, includes 35 gongs – and don't we know it. This, and the poor sound mixing, often renders the dialogue muddy. As for the use of modern language: isn't that rather sensible? A faithful adaptation would have seen everyone speaking in ancient Greek in the dactylic hexameter. And those films never do well at the box office.

Robert Pattinson is outstanding as the villainous Antinous, as is Morton as Circe. I wouldn't have had Damon down for the part of Odysseus, but he's buffed up for it and, in the end, he will make you care. For the two solid hours in which it's set piece after set piece – without a thematic thread or fresh vision – I didn't much care, but by the end, his portrayal of a man broken by the years he's lost, and the men he's lost, proves moving.

Without Odysseus we may never have had Mrs Doubtfire

The film is ultimately spectacular, without being memorable. But I'll always have a soft spot for Odysseus. If only because, without him, we may never have had Mrs Doubtfire.

Pop

Remembrance of things past

Graeme Thomson

Madonna: Confessions II
Warner Records

There comes a point in the career of any established artist when looking backwards seems to be the only possible way to move forwards.

Madonna was a great pop star until she wasn't. *Confessions on a Dance Floor*, released in 2005, was her last really successful record; 'Hung Up', from that album, her last truly unforgettable single. Ever since she has been chasing musical trends with increasingly diminishing returns, the heavy-handed concepts and contrived personae – *Madame X*, anyone? – no longer supported by anything approaching a properly decent song.

So *Confessions II* is an act of both commercial and creative necessity. Its reclamation of the past is twofold. Most obviously, it calls back to *Confessions on a Dance Floor* by reuniting Madonna with producer and co-writer Stuart Price, as well as returning to the direct, uncomplicated house-adjacent sounds and love-to-club themes of that record. Good call. Direct, retro dance-pop proves a far better fit than recent attempts to hitch her wagon to anything from trap to fado.

Ms Ciccone seems to have belatedly remembered that Madonna is, and always has been, the concept

But *Confessions II* goes back further than that. Several songs reminisce on Madonna's origin story. This is rich source material: the young and hungry heroine newly arrived from the Michigan sticks, trying to make it as a dancer in the fleshpots of early 1980s NYC, liberated by dance and the scuzzy Lower East Side counter-culture.

There are pop stars who make the whole thing seem effortless, but Madonna has never been one of those; the underlying sense of acute desperation was always part of her appeal. While it's interesting to hear her open up on the subject, the revelations that follow aren't terribly profound. 'Out here on the dancefloor I feel so free' is, after all, a sentiment she has been expressing ever since 'Into the Groove' more than four decades ago.

But at least Ms Ciccone seems to have belatedly remembered that Madonna is, and always has been, the concept. And if you're not all that interested in the 2026 version, then how about the Madonna of 2005, or 1981?

The best moments here are where these two strands of nostalgia coalesce. ‘Danceteria’ feels thrillingly close to vintage Madonna. Named after a legendary Manhattan club, it’s a whirring disco zinger featuring a generous smattering of classic tropes. There’s a ‘Vogue’-style rap glossed with the usual glib credo – ‘everyone here is a work of art’ – alongside too-cool name-checks (for, among others, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring and David Byrne) and a passing snatch of Lou Reed’s ‘Walk on the Wild Side’. Catchy, upbeat and confident, ‘Danceteria’ is the one track that could hold its own on a best of Madonna collection. ‘One Step Away’, with its dreamy Balearic vibe, might also make the cut, while the hard grooves of ‘Everything’ are mildly intoxicating.

The decision to present the tracks as a club mix, each blending into the other, works until the energy flags halfway through. *Confessions II* is much too long at 16 tracks and 64 minutes. ‘Bring Your Love’, a bland collaboration with the bland Sabrina Carpenter, is one of a fistful of songs that are bleached from memory as soon as they end.

‘Danceteria’ feels thrillingly close to vintage Madonna

As though aware of its own exhaustion, along its final furlong the album pivots to a scene of morning-after calm. Reflections on where Madonna came from give way to a more sombre reckoning on where she is today. The vulnerability that has always existed in her music – from ‘Live To Tell’ to ‘You’ll See’ – shows up on ‘Fragile’, a Latin-tinged acoustic ballad dedicated to her younger brother Christopher, from whom she was estranged for many years before reconciling before his death in 2024.

‘The Test’ is a duet with her daughter Lourdes, credited as Lola Leon, which acknowledges the not particularly surprising fact that having Madonna as a mother might not be the easiest of rides. Leon’s voice, incidentally, fully earns its place on the album: cool, jazzy and strong, it contrasts well with Madonna’s pinched, trebly tone.

Confessions II ends with ‘L.E.S. Girl’, a pretty little song scored with twinkly indie guitar lines and propelled by the rather sad pat-pat of a vintage drum machine. It is an understated, sweetly poignant remembrance of things long lost in the past. ‘Everything fades away,’ she whispers, remembering days of whisky, cigarettes, Polaroids and overdue rent. The goldrush highs of hit singles might be gone, and I’m sure she can cover the mortgage by now, but Madonna hasn’t vanished from cultural relevance just yet.

Assa Kanoute as Hero and Matilda Bailes as Margaret in Much Ado About Nothing at Shakespeare’s Globe

Theatre

Uncivil partnership

Lloyd Evans

Tilly No-Body: Catastrophes of Love
Arcola Theatre, until 25 July

Much Ado About Nothing
Globe Theatre, until 24 October

You may need to do a spot of homework before attending *Tilly No-Body* at the Arcola. Acted and written by Bella Merlin, the play examines the sufferings and blunders of Tilly Newes, an actress born in 1886, who married the experimental German dramatist Frank Wedekind.

At first sight the show looks like a lesson for newcomers but the content is bound to confuse anyone who lacks a working knowledge of German theatre in the early 20th century. The ideal viewer is a literary expert familiar with the whole of Wedekind’s dramatic output. Numerous lines from his plays are quoted, not always with intelligible citations. ‘Women are natural actors’, runs a typical aphorism, and ‘no woman can keep a man happy by behaving sincerely.’

Wedekind’s theatrical idiom relies on elaborate costumes, large-scale gestures, clowning, mime, folksongs and circus acrobatics. To a modern audience these effects may seem facile and dated. And the play’s structure is hard to grasp without a glance at the programme notes.

The action opens as Tilly takes an overdose of poison which triggers a mental flashback that lasts three days and nights. The play lasts just 70 minutes so there’s a lot to pack in.

The director, Miles Anderson, has turned the monologue into an extravaganza that belongs in a stadium like Wembley Arena rather than a basement venue in east London. Tilly capers around the stage, leaping off platforms, flinging multicoloured scarves into the air, singing songs, and occasionally hitting herself in the face while screaming for no particular reason. Sometimes she does a star jump and shrieks like a speared bison. To bring a scene to a close, she likes to slam down the lid of a metal trunk with all her strength. It’s not an easy show to doze through. In a quieter passage, she re-enacts a marital argument by playing Wedekind

The ideal viewer is a literary expert familiar with the whole of Wedekind’s dramatic output

MARC BRENNER

as a snarling lion and herself as a hysterical dachshund. The lop-sided script feels like a toxic rant taken from a divorce petition. And, inevitably, one's sympathies shift towards the accused who is not present to defend himself.

Tilly never loved Wedekind and she married him because she found his wealth and fame impressive. Useful as well, no doubt, although she prefers not to dwell on that significant motive. He built his plays around her talent and organised tours of Germany where she enjoyed great acclaim. But in this show, Tilly treats his tireless promotion of her career as a monstrous abuse of power. The programme notes provide a clue. While writing the script, the author 'had to navigate her past experience of domestic violence'. It seems that Wedekind has copped the heat for another man's misconduct. Eventually Tilly suffers a breakdown and withdraws to a padded cell where she recovers noisily. This is a risky ticket to buy. The show may sharpen your appetite for Wedekind's work or leave it fatally weakened. At press night, the enthusiastic crowd found plenty to applaud.

Much Ado at the Globe includes an unusual sight gag. At the nuptials between Claudio and Hero, the groom shoves the bride's face into the wedding cake. Dollops of cream spatter all over the costumes and the floorboards – but no one cares. Fun is the show's only objective. And it succeeds. Ken Nwosu's amiable Benedick doesn't look much like a war hero ready to swap the battlefield for domestic bliss. He plays him as a fun-loving buffoon who slobs around in cheap slacks and a spotless cotton shirt. You can imagine him wearing an apron.

Pippa Nixon gets closer to the mark by portraying Beatrice as a raunchy, embittered seductress with cobra-like tendencies. Her sexually combative performance masks the absence of any real sizzle between her and her tubby suitor.

Richard Katz achieves the near-impossible by making Dogberry funny. The joke is that Dogberry has dyslexia and lacks the emotional skills to lead a team of security guards. 'Be vigitant,' he tells his underlings. Katz creates a panicky, over-anxious disciplinarian who senses that something is amiss but can't see quite what it is. Brilliant work.

The director Chelsea Walker has resisted the temptation to tinker too much with the Globe's structure. The two red pillars are sheathed in milky white fabric and the rear elevation has been hidden behind a double staircase, also painted white. It sounds bland but this simple set-up generates numerous opportunities for visual gags and mischief. All the comic effects are skilfully handled. Luckily, the production has no overarching 'concept' to weigh things down. The costumes are chic but not showy. The music is present but not insistent or obtrusive. Walker breaks with current orthodoxy by assigning the female roles to actresses and the male roles to actors, in accordance with the scheme set out by the author. It seems to work. This experiment might be worth repeating.

Television

Original sin

James Delingpole

Little House on the Prairie
Netflix

Faithless
Sky Atlantic/NOW

You can tell things have started to get really bad by the fact that they're bringing back *Little House on the Prairie*. When a society is in serious crisis – or so I've read – it no longer needs edgy, transgressive, exciting art to push boundaries and challenge assumptions. Rather, it needs to be soothed and cosseted with bland, undemanding and familiar comfort food. Nothing, not even *The Waltons*, does that quite like *Prairie*.

It first appeared on British screens in January 1975 – so after an annus horribilis, including the Three-Day Week, power cuts, the miners' strike, the Birmingham and Guildford pub bombings, etc. – and was scheduled to capture children just before bedtime. I'd love to be able to claim having pleaded with my parents for an early night so as to escape the saccharine horror. Except, if you remember, that wasn't quite how you thought as a child in the 1970s. Your sole priority was accumulated viewing hours.

People griping about the remake have clearly forgotten how dire the original was

So, shamefully, I may well have gawped uncritically at quite a few of the original series' 200-odd episodes. The one where the girls get scared of wolves; the one where they are helped through a crisis by a friendly Indian (as we still called them in those days); the one where one of the little blonde girls loses her ribbon and then finds it; the one where the dog barks, but it's OK, it's not a wolf but a cute baby porcupine; and the one where it's the worst ever winter and they can only survive by drawing lots to see which daughter gets eaten first. I just made all these up but that, roughly, apart from the last one, was the extent of the drama.

People griping about the remake have

ERIC ZACHANOWICH/NETFLIX © 2026

Alice Halsey as Laura Ingalls and Luke Bracey as Charles Ingalls in Netflix's new Little House on the Prairie

clearly forgotten how dire the original was. Michael Landon Sr, who played the Dad, looked like a Santa Monica hairdresser transplanted to the rural Midwest. He never sweated when he was building his charmingly inept log cabins because his skin was made of spray-tanned plastic.

Apparently the autobiographical books on which the series was based, by Laura Ingalls Wilder, are much more echt. 'The only good Indian is a dead Indian,' says one character. Indians were a sore point because, having moved in their wagon out west, the Wilders kept discovering that the land to which they thought they were entitled belonged to the natives. There's also a strong anti-government theme running through the series because Laura's daughter, Rose Wilder Lane, who edited the books, was, with Ayn Rand, an early influence on the American libertarian movement.

Much of this, inevitably, has been sanitised in the new TV series which includes a kindly black doctor (who, to be fair, was in the original books), proud, reserved but bighearted injuns, and bruised, bitter but fundamentally decent frontiersmen. It's a world where family comes first, cheerful determination invariably triumphs over adversity, and you know the dog that disappears at the beginning of the first episode isn't going to be discovered dead and half eaten by wolves. (Wolves that are computer-generated, by the way, and look ridiculous and sub-*Game of Thrones*.)

But I still think it can be enjoyed as a guilty pleasure. There's something endlessly alluring about the 'scraping a little piece of paradise out of the harsh unyielding wilderness' genre, something that appeals to our most primal instincts. Hence the appeal of *Robinson Crusoe* and *Swiss Family Robinson*. Not to mention *Clarkson's Farm*.

I just want everything to be nice, gentle, heartwarming, like, say, that comedy series Small Prophets

If the twee gets too much for you, there's always *Faithless*. You might think from the first, beautifully shot episode that it is going to be a lyrical, nostalgic meditation on art and love. It's set in 1970s Sweden, where the inamorata Marianne (Frida Gustavsson) is blonde and beautiful, her prospective lover David somehow manages to look great in a maroon corduroy suit, you can still smoke on aeroplanes (indeed it's still almost compulsory everywhere), there's a gorgeous weekend retreat on the lake and even the jazz played by the groovy, handsome pianist husband Markus (August Wittgenstein) sounds bearable.

Do not be fooled, though. This is based on an autobiographical script by Ingmar Bergman – never known as Mr Fun Central – about the devastating consequences of an affair he had with his best friend's wife. You wouldn't necessarily guess it from the first two episodes – the second is a flash-forward to the present, in which the unfaithful lovers meet for the first time in years – but things are going to get really grim.

And I don't want grim, really I don't. Whenever I'm trying to get Boy to recommend some art film to watch, I always stress: 'Please. Nothing too depressing.' The same goes with TV. I just want everything to be nice, gentle, heartwarming, like, say, that comedy series *Small Prophets*. My difficulty with *Faithless*, thus far, is that it's so well done – directed by Tomas Alfredson, who did the rather wonderful vampire movie *Let the Right One In* – that I haven't yet found the excuse I need for a tactical bail-out.

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NOTES ON...

Panini stickers

By *John Sturgis*

You could attempt to interest your kids in the World Cup by introducing them to Panini stickers. Or you may consider it more affordable in the longer term to introduce them to crack cocaine instead. Because these football-themed collectables are not just habit-forming but positively addictive, which can be financially ruinous for those paying.

The Italian brand first launched here ahead of the World Cup in Argentina in 1978 when only Scotland of the Home Nations were among the 16 teams to qualify. Fast forward 48 years and the World Cup has trebled in size to 48 teams. So this year's corresponding Panini collection is bigger, brighter – and more expensive – than ever before.

The 2026 edition requires collecting some 980 unique stickers, including 12 available only in a separate Coca-Cola promo. There are also premium cards – a gold-edged Kylian Mbappé, for example – which are rumoured to be issued in smaller numbers. The estimated cost for completing an album by simply buying random packets at £1.25 per seven stickers is £1,300 – or likely far more.

My first Panini World Cup was Spain '82. That summer, apart from the sums that went on learning to smoke (and you could get ten Rothmans in those days for just 35p), I spent every penny of my pocket money on stickers. You would buy a colourful envelope, tear it open and see which were new and which you already had. Then you would take the latter to school to swap. You'd look at other offerings dealt out like a deck of cards – 'got… got… need' – and then strike deals, like nascent City traders. The most coveted '82 sticker was Brazil's Zico – until the team was knocked out by Italy, when it became Paolo Rossi instead. I recall having so many Alan Roughs I couldn't give them away.

The UK office of the company is in my hometown, Tunbridge Wells, which, curiously, was also the birthplace of another football spin-off, Subbuteo. You'd hope that someone's mum might have worked for Panini and brought home buckets of freebies, but we never got a sniff of anything like this. And, despite all my financial and emotional commitment, I still ended up with barely half of my album filled.

These days there are WhatsApp and Facebook groups for more efficient swapping – a bit like Tinder but for stickers of Jordan Henderson rather than no-strings sex. There are also sticker-swapping conventions. You can even, for a premium price, order a specific sticker from Panini direct. Though this is the collecting equivalent of Donald Trump asking Gianni Infantino to rescind a red card: bad form.

This year I have heard many of my friends talking excitedly about how obsessed their kids are with collecting them. And I wondered: how could children of the digital age be so seduced by something so defiantly old-fashioned as a paper sticker? Suddenly I realised: they're not. They're just being nice. Having detected Dad's enthusiasm, they indulge him by pretending interest, before getting back to TikTok as soon as they can.

The modern Panini market, I'm certain, is not driven by children but nostalgic adults trying to engage with their tech-obsessed children via a medium they feel more at home with than YouTube.

But I suppose a Panini sticker album is less ghastly as a midlife-crisis medium than a Porsche, and still – slightly – cheaper.

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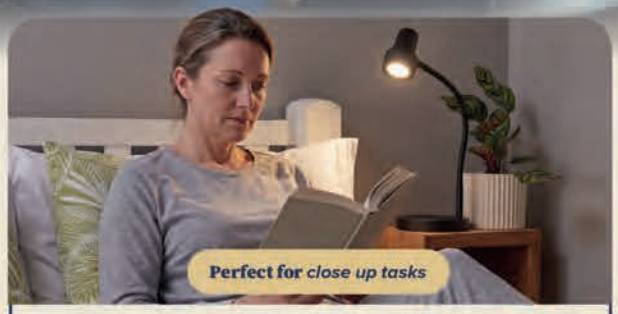

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To its credit, the building is a tad more attractive than the new Thanet Parkway station, but then so is the station at Auschwitz.
— ***Rory Sutherland, p61***

LIFE

No life
Lloyd Evans

How does Tower Hamlets spend my council tax? I've been shovelling cash at them for 19 years so I strolled along to the new town hall to find out where the money goes. The new town hall cost a packet, clearly. Carved out of the Royal London Hospital, the spacious lobby looks cool, stylish and reassuringly anonymous, like a private bank in Zurich. Glass doors swish apart and I enter the debating chamber where the councillors sit at a curved mono-desk opposite the public gallery. Everything is slick and hyper-modern. The pristine floor glows beneath the recessed lights. I had expected an ordinary meeting but I seem to have stumbled on an important debate.

Developers are applying for permission to build three skyscrapers on a vacant lot on the Isle of Dogs. Zillions of pounds are at stake. Battle begins. Mr Developer shows us slides of the 180ft towers which are made of twinkly steel and glass, but they bear no trace of ornament, warmth or imaginative flair. Soulless boxes for robot citizens. Hives of chrome where human termites will lurk. Mr Developer promises homes for 918 students as well as larger apartments for families on the 'affordable housing' list. He doesn't call the flats 'flats'. He calls them 'units'.

I've been shovelling cash at them for 19 years so I strolled along to the new town hall to find out where the money goes

Objections are raised. A councillor asks about students disturbing the peace with parties and all-night sex marathons. No chance, apparently. A university rep assures us that his students are swots who work around the clock. 'They keep their heads down,' he says. But will the new inhabitants overwhelm the Tube? We learn that a sweetener of £133,000 has been promised to the network controllers. A councillor wonders how this figure was calculated. Mr Developer isn't certain. And no one asks what the money will actually buy. Maybe the sum was dreamed up by a fat cat at Transport for London.

It's frustrating that we can't put questions from the floor and we have to rely on our elected betters. Not an impressive crew. Most are male, many are Bangladeshi. They sit hunched in their seats, staring at their screens and muttering questions into their microphones. Many seem unfamiliar with spoken English. One elderly chap keeps saying 'dovmont' when he means 'development'. All of them lack the fizz and sparkle that come from speaking regularly in public.

How did these drowsy mumblers get elected? Perhaps it's no coincidence that Tower Hamlets has a rather cavalier approach to democracy. The mayor, Lutfur Rahman, was sacked in 2015 after an electoral court found him guilty of bribery, postal vote offences and making false statements about a candidate. Yet he returned to power in 2022.

The debate moves to 'affordable homes'. A previous developer had earmarked 300 underpriced flats for poorer tenants but the number has dropped to 59. Why so few? Mr Developer explains that he can't raise enough cash for more – which sounds fair enough. 'Affordable to sell' may mean unaffordable to build. And the 'affordable homes' label sounds suspicious. Speculators look for properties being sold in haste under pressure from creditors or from greedy family members itching to get their hands on granny's loot. But with left-wing councils, the pressure is manufactured by the saintly politicians themselves who want to pose as saviours of the downtrodden. Estate agents don't give a fig about motives, however, only about prices. And the sharks ensure that every bargain swiftly rejoins the market at full value. The speculator may be the new owner himself. Even the most deserving tenant with a disability is likely to flip his affordable home and bank the profits. That's what I'd do.

Finally, the all-important vote. The nine councillors raise their hands. And it's close. Four against. Five in favour. Motion carried. Permission granted. Towers ahoy. This seismic result is greeted in near silence. Mr Developer and his team melt quietly away. And the dopey councillors seem reluctant to celebrate the 'community infrastructure levy' of £8.5 million, which is owed to the council in return for planning permission. Sadiq Khan and the GLA will collect an additional £2.1 million. What a triumph for socialism. A bunch of capitalists have just been relieved of ten million quid and the haul will be shared out among the needy and the skint. Won't it? Mayor Rahman is absent but the result aligns perfectly with his vision for the borough. 'We want to go high. We want to go dense. And we're open to business,' he said in a recent pitch to investors. He welcomes developers who can build gulags-in-the-sky and cram them with inmates – preferably students whose fees enrich the universities and keep the supply chain lubricated.

Mayor Rahman welcomes developers who can build gulags-in-the-sky and cram them with inmates

Last March, the mayor and his team visited Cannes for a property fair arranged by MIPIM (Le Marché International des Professionnels de l'Immobilier). The jamboree set out to 'bring together the world's real estate decision-makers to help them unlock capital through strategic partnerships'. Mayor Rahman had such a good time that he went back this year.

So here's what I learnt at the town hall. My taxes subsidise a four-sided property cartel. The mayor supplies the contracts. The speculators raise the towers. The university stuffs them with lodgers. And the East End provides the land. I can't help noticing that one of these resources is not renewable.

Dog's life
Sophia Money-Coutts

'No dog of mine will sleep on my bed,' I swore, before Dennis came along. People who allowed dogs on their beds were feeble, I believed, not far removed from the sort

of parent you overhear in restaurants saying: ‘Persephone, if you do that again Daddy’s going to get jolly cross.’ I’d be more disciplined. My dog would sleep in the kitchen, like any self-respecting normal dog.

Dennis arrived, just ten weeks old, and on his first night was duly shut in the secondhand crate I’d bought on Facebook Marketplace for £20, from a woman who owned a mastiff called Hades. This crate was in my kitchen.

I went to bed and tried to ignore the pitiful mewling. Guess how long I lasted? Twenty minutes, if that, whereupon I caved and lugged the crate to my bedroom. Over the past two years, Dennis has since graduated from the crate to a dog bed in my room, to my bed, where he now lies every night, on his back, legs akimbo, like a weary Casanova after a long day at the coalface.

It’s companionable, I tell people defensively. I’m single and I like the bulk of a small terrier against my leg at night. Better Dennis than the bulk of certain ex-boyfriends. He’s not under the duvet. That’s my hard line (unlike my friend Hannah, who allows her whippet under the cover, between her and her other half). But he’s up there all the same, his bottom sometimes perilously close to the pillows, settling down when I turn off the bedside light with a contented sigh. There isn’t much fidgeting, unless he hears a fox in the garden but, again, I’d take the occasional growl over the Panzer-like rumbling of a middle-aged man.

Might my single status and attitude towards dogs on beds be somehow correlated, I hear you muse. Well, I’ve recently read the howlingly funny and meticulously researched forthcoming biography of Barbara Cartland, *The Great Dictator* by Matthew Sweet, and was delighted to learn that Barbs allowed her Pekes on the bed (although the labradors had to stay downstairs). And it didn’t seem to do her love life any harm, did it? Or her prodigious output, for that matter.

Might my single status and attitude towards dogs on beds be somehow correlated, I hear you muse

Admittedly, there was one dicey moment when Dennis was small and a new flame came to stay for the weekend, and he had to be carted out of the bedroom for a spell (Dennis, not the flame). Some people may be able to perform while their dog watches on, but that seems a red flag to me. Fortunately, most dating apps now allow their users to indicate if they have a pet by adding a twee little pawprint to their profile, so one can pick and choose between those unlikely to fuss about a terrier on the bed and those who view it as an arrestable offence.

There are plenty of the latter around. People who shriek about hygiene and claim it’s deeply unsanitary for dogs to be allowed on beds or even just upstairs – but how many of these people, I wonder, take their phones to the lavatory with them? I don’t see that dogs are so much worse. Nearly half of all Brits allow their pets to sleep on their beds, according to one of those deeply scientific surveys that comes out on such matters from time to time, and our immune systems are boosted accordingly.

It only occasionally presents a problem when I go to stay with someone. Because while Dennis is allowed to roam where he likes at home and almost no piece of furniture is off-limits (except, perhaps, the kitchen table), even I understand that other people may have different rules in their houses. My mother often forlornly recounts the tale of going to stay with friends in Oxfordshire for a straightforward shooting weekend one January, when the guests’ dogs were expected to sleep outside in their respective cars.

That was some decades ago, in the days when dogs weren’t as mollycoddled as now. These days, I pack a blanket to protect my host’s bedding from pawprints, or I have a quiet word with Dennis beforehand and tell him that, on this occasion, just for a night or so, he’ll have to play Cinderella and doss down in the kitchen.

On the other hand, I feel quite differently about shared spaces such as restaurants or public transport. Not so long ago, in an Italian on the Fulham Road, I watched a man and his small dog share a plate of tagliata. Both were sitting on the plush banquette. What if its next occupant had an allergy?

Ditto seats on the train or Tube. A few weeks ago, I hopped on the Victoria line, longing to sit down after a difficult day, and came up against a brindle-coloured mutt of some sort sitting happily on a priority seat beside its owner. I often ask people to remove their bags in such instances – ‘Please can I sit down?’ in brisk Mary Poppins mode. Yet I hesitated over the dog. I disapproved but felt that as a doggie sort I couldn’t kick up a fuss. Perhaps I should have asked for the chap’s number.

‘It’s just nice to be somewhere cool.’

Still life

Catriona Olding

Provence

Under late June’s ferocious heat dome, during what turned out to be an almost eight-hour drive to join Martin Vander Weyer and his guests for three nights in the Dordogne, my car was telling me it wouldn’t start due to a recurring AdBlue emissions fault. And my old phone was pegging out. At home I hadn’t had hot water – or cold – for five days because the boiler was broken. There was also a leak. I had to turn the water on and off at the mains when I needed it. Life was turning out to be more troglodyte than I bargained for. Although the water, when it ran, was chilly, my brain was overheating even before the temperature hit 44°C in the Dordogne. Like in the UK, I don’t have enough income or savings to cover all my bills. Unlike in the UK, I’m just myself and lenders won’t ignore my insufficient earnings. I can’t borrow or remortgage. All I can do is work as hard as I can, pray and hope.

I spent 50 years in the west of Scotland so, believe me, I can swear. But this was too much

The following week I was in London for *Spectator* events and, staying with kind friends in Kew, forgot my worries for a few days. They’re great company and live in a big house, full of paintings and comfortable sofas. I enjoyed running down the stairs. In the cave, the stairs between the three levels are almost boat-ladder steps and hazardous to the exuberant. After Harry Kane scored his second goal against DR Congo, the *Spectator* summer party sparkled even more than usual, and the night before we’d all had a terrific time at the Provençal wine tasting I helped to host. Not knowing when I’d be back, I was sad to leave.

The easyJet flight was packed. I boarded quickly and had an aisle seat in row four. Later, a large lady about my age in front complained imperiously to the tattooed Cockney stewardess that there was no room in the locker above her seat for her carry-on. She was politely told to stow the case further down the plane. Beside me in the middle seat was a pretty young woman in her mid-twenties. A slightly older, rich-looking man sat at the window. It turned out they’d met before, and they struck up a conversation. Fear of a bird strike kept us on the tarmac for

an hour after our scheduled departure. Soon I was regretting not bringing headphones.

'Fuck! No way!' 'Amazing!' 'Fuck! Fuck yes, of course I know them… Oh my God!' I spent 50 years in the west of Scotland so, believe me, I can swear. A few of my Glasgow chums swear mid-word, as in 'absofucking-lutely'. But this was too much. The man beside the window told the girl that he travelled the world expanding business for the company he worked for. His list of countries sounded like a Kuoni travel brochure. Then the girl said: 'I'm in yachting now, a new yacht is £15 million to £17 million, but if you want to make money you should be an estate agent. That's what I did. I made masses really quickly. If someone asked a question I didn't know the answer to, I just lied. All the time – made it up. So funny!' Even her flashy new companion baulked at this.

After takeoff, the conversation moved from jobs and wealth to romance. The girl continued: 'When I was 21, I only went out with much older millionaires. I had a fantastic time. But my last boyfriend dumped me two weeks ago.' The man moved closer: 'More fool him…' After the trolley came round, the couple became louder and shriller, bouncing around in their seats. The girl unknowingly flicked her hair in my face. 'I got soooo drunk on tequila once, my friends couldn't wake me up and called my mum to come and get me. She was really drunk as well and didn't want to, but she did. You should've seen the two of us. Hilarious! I was lucky she was there. My parents travel all the time you see.' Halfway down France,

Halfway down France, I couldn't read, write or even think for the 1980s parody playing out beside me

I couldn't read, write or even think for the 1980s parody playing out beside me. A bird strike would have been welcome. Mercifully I saw the Alps appearing out of the window. Before long I'd get away from this pair of honking barbarians.

As the plane taxied towards the gate, the woman in front undid her seatbelt and leapt up, only to be quickly rebuked by the same no-nonsense stewardess. A few minutes later, when the seatbelt signs went off, I stood up. In search of her bag down the plane, the woman in front hurriedly clambered over her benign, Panama-hatted husband and bowled towards me. I wasn't much good at physics, but I do remember that $F=ma$ (force equals mass times acceleration). Like some huge, unstoppable prop forward in pink Brora florals, the woman barrelled past, smashing into my shoulder and knocking me off my feet. The stewardess yelled and people tutted. No apology; the woman in pink just grinned, unrepentant. But the couple beside me were kind and sympathetic – and therefore forgiven. We were all young and daft once.

Wheel life

Tanya Gold

The oddities at the Penzance Rotary Club Classic Car & Bike Show included a golden thing that looked like the affair baby of an Alfa Romeo roadster and a Silver Ghost; a three-wheel Messerschmitt Cabin Scooter with the nerve to call itself a cabriolet and a picnic basket on the back, presumably for your body parts after it kills you. But the most beautiful car was the Aston Martin: a Vantage sports car. It is always an Aston Martin unless an understated Ferrari is lurking. Then it is still, probably, an Aston Martin.

The Vantage is as gorgeous as the new Aston Martin DB12 S, which I drove in France in May. A few mistakes aside – the Cygnet, their weird coalition-era city car, for example, which looked like the Fiat Panda would if it were sold into sexual slavery in Knightsbridge – Aston Martins just get better. According to the business pages the company is a basket case, but that is part of its myth: it grew out of armaments production and motor-racing. What do you expect – sanity? It is in the moonshot business: a mirror to our fatalism and romance. Without it we'd just have the Mini. There's nothing wrong with a Mini, but they don't exude lust.

I wanted to write this without mentioning James Bond and his silver DB5, because it makes me think about the TaxPayers' Alliance – why is a civil servant driving a £750,000 car (in *Skyfall*)? You had to fight the DB5 to drive it anyway, and the truth is more heroic. More interesting than Bond – and far richer – was Dave Brown (DB), the most famous of the men who tried to hold the moonshot. The family business David Brown & Sons made the gearboxes for the Spitfire. (I wonder if the Messerschmitt Cabin Scooter is an oblique apology for the Luftwaffe. As in: we only hurt ourselves these days.) I read that when the American War Production Board named five reasons the Axis powers lost they included the survival of this factory in Yorkshire, alongside the invasion of Russia and the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and I want to believe it. DB gave his name to the cars.

'And could you answer the question without being an outspoken woman...'

There are four kinds of Aston Martin now: the sports car; the grand tourer; the DBX (the Formula 1 recovery, or nursing, car); and the Valhalla and the Valkyrie racing cars, which are too valuable for me to put my hands on. I'll take the grand tourer, but I indicated into the pit lane at Goodwood, and I'll take this one, because it's the best Aston Martin GT so far. Let purists talk about the DB5. I don't want to fight with a motorcar. That is what people are for.

The DB12 S is handsome in a way that is no longer common for anything. The time when, say, a lovely 1960 Alfa Romeo Giuli-

The time when a 1960 Alfa Romeo Giulietta was normal has gone, along with the optimism that made it

etta was normal – there was also the Jaguar E-Type, the Shelby Cobra, and the Porsche 911 – has gone, along with the optimism that made it. Cars have got better, safer, and much uglier. But not the DB12 S, with its part-Italian heritage: the DB5's coachwork was designed in Milan. Short at the back, wide at the front with stacked exhausts and the thinnest spokes in history, it preens at me. No wonder men love it – there is always something new to find. Today I think it looks like a carbon-fibre Stradivarius; yesterday, an art deco jewel. Possibly because most modern cars look like panic rooms, this one mashes my head. I feel high driving it, but petrol has always been a drug. People die for it.

I can't speak for the racetrack, but on French roads it is biddable. The twin-turbo V8 engine may take me from 0-62mph in 3.4 seconds but I feel glued to the road by the specialist Michelin tyres and soothed by the ceramic brakes. The steering is vastly responsive: any fool can drive it. Tolstoy was right: happiness is dull to write about, but not to feel. This is a perfect car, until the next one. I can't say how the feeling lasts. Do you feel as happy in a DB12 S at ten weeks as at ten minutes, or do you chase the dragon down his roads? But if I could remake my nonexistent financial plan, I would include an Aston Martin GT, and I would be a stranger to myself.

In the old days it was normal for an Aston Martin engineer to covertly install a monster V12 engine in his own car, and you wouldn't get away with that at Volkswagen. The DB12 S is £205,000 and rising – customisation is everywhere. It's named Martin for its co-founder Lionel, and Aston for a Buckinghamshire hill it never expected to mount but did. I know how it feels.

Chess

Naroditsky Memorial

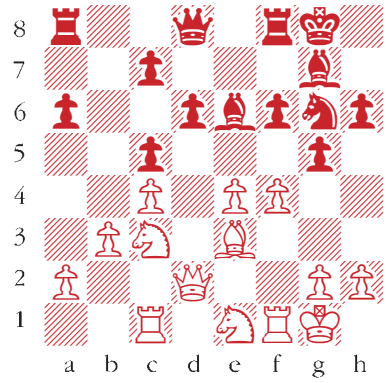
Luke McShane

The inaugural Daniel Naroditsky Memorial Rapid and Blitz took place early in July in Charlotte, North Carolina. Organised by the Charlotte Chess Center Foundation, where Naroditsky had served as resident grandmaster, the event honoured the popular streamer and commentator, known to fans as 'Danya', who died in October aged 29. Rapid and blitz were fitting formats, as Naroditsky was one of the world's top blitz specialists, particularly in online play. A stellar field included Fabiano Caruana, Hikaru Nakamura and Wesley So, as well as the Candidates winner Javokhir Sindarov. Sindarov took first place in both disciplines, and paid tribute to Naroditsky, describing him as the 'kindest person in chess'.

The event coincided with the publication of a report by the Fide Ethics and Disciplinary Commission which found the former world champion Vladimir Kramnik guilty of cyber-bullying and other conduct violations. His conduct towards Naroditsky was cited multiple times in the report. He has been given a ban of at least a year from participating in Fide events, and 12 months of unpaid service to the chess community. Kramnik has stated that he intends to appeal.

Dariusz Swiercz-Javokhir Sindarov
Naroditsky Memorial Rapid, July 2026

Black to play, position after 18 f2-f4

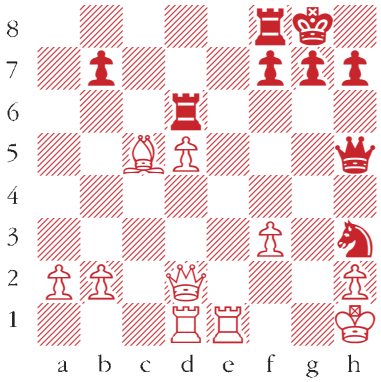


Sindarov seized the initiative with **18...f5! 19 exf5** After 19 fxg5 he probably intended a pawn sacrifice: 19…f4 20 Bxf4 Nxf4 21 Rxf4 Qxg5 with good prospects. **gxf4 20 Bxf4 Rxf5 21 Nd3** 21 Bxh6? loses the bishop to Rxf1+ 22 Kxf1 Qf8+. **Qf6 22 Ne2 Rf8 23 Rce1 Bd7 24 Qc1 Bc6 25 Bg3 h5! 26 h3 h4 27 Bh2 Qf7 28 Ndf4** 28 Rxf5 Qxf5 29 Ndf4 struggles on, because 29…Bh6 can be met by 30 Rf1. Nevertheless White stands much worse. **Bh6** Winning material, as White cannot defend the knight. **29 Nxg6 Qxg6** Threatening mate and the queen, so **White resigns**

Another player who could be thrilled with his result was 17-year-old Ethan Sheehan, the only non-grandmaster to make it to the final of the blitz event, and the lowest seed by far. But he finished in third place, including this dramatic victory against the tournament favourite.

Ethan Sheehan-Hikaru Nakamura
Naroditsky Memorial Blitz, July 2026

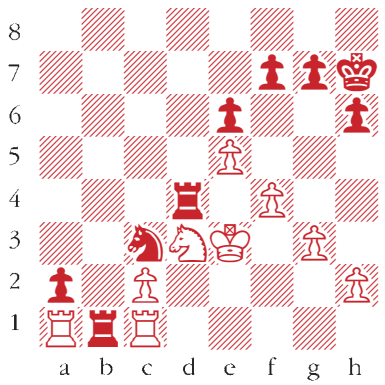
Black to play, position after 23 Ba7-c5



23... Rg6? The threat of mate with Qxf3+ seems to solve the problem of the skewered rooks, but stumbles into a bigger issue. 23…b6! was the strongest move, since 24 Bxd6 Qxf3+ 25 Qg2 Nf2+ 26 Kg1 Nh3+ leads to a draw by repetition. **24 Qe3!** Meeting the threat to f3, and now 24…Rc8 25 Qe8+ leads to mate. This twist costs Black a whole rook. **Qf5 25 Bxf8 h6 26 Bc5 Nf4 27 Qe8+ Kh7 28 Qe4 Qh3 29 Rg1 Ng2 Black lost on time**, but with a rook less the position is hopeless.

PUZZLE NO. 908

Black to play. Sukandar-Caruana, Naroditsky Memorial Rapid, July 2026. Caruana holds a big advantage in the endgame, and his next move decided matters with a flourish. What did he play? Email answers to **chess@spectator.co.uk** by Monday 20 July. There is a prize of a £20 John Lewis voucher for the first correct answer out of a hat. Please include a postal address and allow six weeks for prize delivery.



Last week's solution 1…Qxh2+! 2 Kxh2 Rh7+ 3 Kg1 Rh1#
Last week's winner Makram Hayek, Windermere

Competition

Resignation

Victoria Lane

Comp. 3458 invited you to submit a fictional character's stepping-down letter. A new light was cast on various figures, from Joseph Houlihan's Big Brother wanting more time with his family to Sylvia Fairley's Miss Jean Brodie considering a non-ministerial position in the Scottish parliament: 'I'm prepared to accept a modest salary and I shall let it be known that I own an adequate coffee machine, a good fountain pen that I've used for years and a reliable watch…'. Jeeves and Bond each made three appearances (nods to Nicholas Lee, John Moore, Ralph Goldswain and W.J. Webster). There were many very good entries, but the £25 vouchers go to those below.

My Dear Doctor – Following our recent contretemps I shall leave Rugby forthwith, simultaneously resigning from the position of School Bully, which I have filled happily, and I think effectively, for some years. You severely criticise my methods, yet are not our aims identical – to produce future rulers of the Empire? You offer them a philosophy to spout piously; I have been more practical. You dislike my practice of roasting fags over the fire; but what better preparation for the scorching temperatures of our tropical dominions? You resent what you term my 'arrogant, sneering manner', yet perhaps I deliberately assumed this as a model that scholars might learn to emulate, whether dealing with lesser breeds, with social inferiors, or with womenfolk. I like to think that in future life-quandaries, the question 'What would Flashman do?' will pop into their minds. They will know the answer. They will flourish. *George Simmers*

Your Royal Highness
I have proudly served your Family, six days a week, since 1981. However, changes to my working conditions mean that I must now, regretfully, resign. The cruel imprisonment of Mrs Goggins during the Horizon scandal was bad enough: but I felt it was my solemn duty to continue serving our traumatised community during her incarceration. Road conditions too have markedly deteriorated (one incident involving my van and an unfilled crater led to unkind Greendale wags dubbing it 'The Pathole'). Yet still I carried on. However, following an anonymous complaint to the local RSPCA, my beloved cat Jess has now been banned from accompanying me on my rounds, unless appropriately belted and/or muzzled.

Perhaps you have heard the old joke: 'What would you call Postman Pat if he lost his job?' With profound sadness, I must now confirm the answer.
Your loyal former servant, Pat *Richard Warren*

To They Who Must Be Obeyed
I've recently been informed that my values no longer align with those of the organisation and the tools that have enabled me to perform a variety of roles over the years, from debonair misogynist to conflicted miserabilist, are being modified to capture the zeitgeist, vodka martinis replaced by kombucha mocktails, my Aston Martin exchanged for a Nissan Leaf, my position as Chief Smoothie ceded to that dour duo, Avocado and Kale. My personal assistants morphed into radical feminists some time

ago and I now find myself the subject of sexual abuse allegations for having playfully smacked a woman on the bottom 60 years ago. To rehabilitate my reputation, it has been suggested that I transition from male to female. This has left me shaken not stirred, and I feel my retirement is long overdue. I am therefore applying for a Licence to Chill.
J.B. *Sue Pickard*

Dear Mr Wooster
It is with some measure of regret that I tender my resignation after many years of assisting you in the vicissitudes of contemporary domestic and social life. Your Aunt Agatha's recent reference to my role as your 'keeper' presented me with an alternative view of our relationship and respective dependencies, not to our advantage, I fear. I trust I leave you suitably prepared for the variety of daily challenges encountered by any young gentleman in search of the best that London can offer. I have taken the precaution of re-arranging your wardrobe, grading your suits in order of brilliance, and I would counsel you in favour of the more neutral end of the spectrum, even for the Drones. You might recall that Hamlet favoured more sober tones.

I have also laid in a supply of tinned sardines for my successor so that you will have a continuity of appropriately supported service.
Your faithful servant, Jeeves. *D.A. Prince*

Gentlemen, I hereby resign my senior position with Sodor Railways. After years of service, I find myself unable to take the relentless anthropomorphism of the engines anymore, although it will surely be agreed that I have borne the body-shaming ('fat controller' indeed!) with fortitude. I have always had a particular problem with the egregious Thomas, who persists in interpreting 'useful' as meaning insufferably smug and know-it-all, whilst causing mayhem, confusion and delay simply to provide narratives which are neither edifying nor entertaining. I was of course gratified to see that an enquiry has been opened into allegations of historical sexual misconduct on his part, made by Annie and Clarabel, most notably for incidences of non-consensual shunting.

I shall be taking up a post with LNER, where there are fewer trains, they talk less, and sometimes do not run at all, which will suit me admirably.
Yours etc. Topham Hatt KBE *Brian Murdoch*

Dear Lady Catherine
Too long have I dwelt amidst the tents of Kedar; it behoves me to inform your ladyship, as proprietrix of the advowson of Hunsford, that I hereby resign the living thereof since (as I perhaps should have mentioned already) I have succeeded to the Longbourn estate, and the dignity of my father's natal cognomen, on the most regrettable death of my esteemed cousin Bennet. My dear Charlotte and I wish to state that we will prefer even Mrs Clarence Bennet's prattle (relieved, as it sometimes is, by lively intercourse with the dowager Lady Wickham) to your tedious, boastful and overbearing monologues; and that only a small talent for pleasing flattery (on which I pique myself) has prevented me from advising you previously, madam, that you are a swellhead, a bore and a bully – and you cheat at cards!
Yours sincerely (at last),
W. Collins Bennet *Frank Upton*

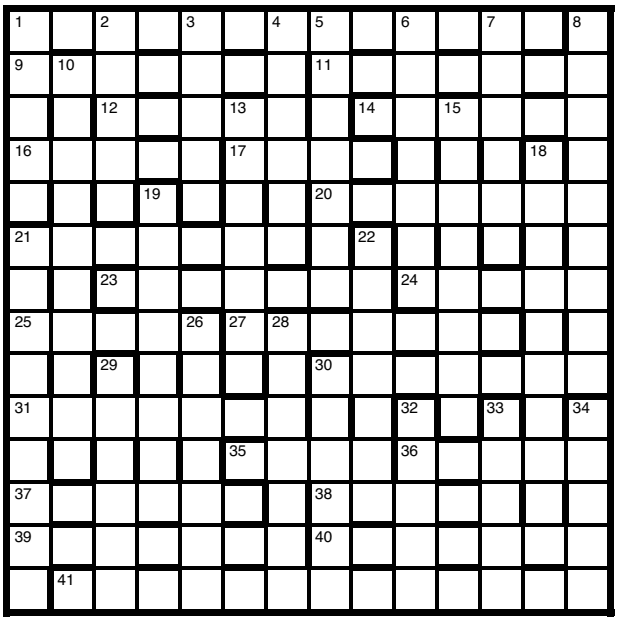
NO. 3461: CRINGE BENEFITS

You are invited to submit toe-curling analogies (up to five). Please email entries to competition@spectator.co.uk by midday on 29 July.

Crossword 2761: Alphabetical Jigsaw *by Doc*

The set of 26 clues leads to solutions beginning with A to Z, one per letter, which then have to be fitted into the grid wherever they will fit. The numbered clues are normal.

A Like carrier, off course (6)
B Instrument from Juliet at ferry port, cycling (5)
C Court case condemned Glitter (9)
D Overdid a little drink – date is off (10)
E Bird at 36 lough (4)
F Loud isn't very soft (5)
G Cricketer Joel's stores (7)
H Worker lost diamonds alone in *Star Wars* (3,4)
I Flag girl's husband from Cork, say (5)
J Port and orange (5)
K King missing Queen at German monastery (7)
L Resounding soccer win repulsed singer (6)
M Spread you love or hate! (7)
N Immigrant's child in Boston is eight (5)
O Truly sorry, empty, to make return journey (7)
P Singer in church introduced by priest (6)
Q Queen's radio broadcast, for example, at French FO (4,6)
R Fashion items thugs picked up (5)
S One holding hot stones (7)
T Loo for hire – I entered (6)
U One holding adult Christian (5)
V Feud over 500 gatecrashing ground at event (8)
W A question of property (5)
X French boy, cross, with a German quartet (6)
Y Shetland isle's calls (5)
Z Nick losing head following unknown love (5)



Across

1 Absurd mothers tailored beachwear (7,6)
9 A child of 5 as friar (7)
24 Sole card game in part (5)
25 Essentially fervent SA plots (5)
27 Grass to spare, maybe (7)
30 Law in French 'Thou art in public' (7)
35 Amid beta, lambda and others (2,2)
39 French language clubs in action abroad (7)
40 Is superior to former favourites, we hear (7)
41 Hellfire caver swapped stationery item (5-4,4)

Down

6 Away, using LSD (2,1,4)
13 Sworn enemies – with 1 worn out, maybe (7)
19 Church ushers, say, from Unst? (8)
21 Fruit – lemon gone off (4,5)
22 Priest and maestro talk idly (7)
26 Innocence troubled Venetia (7)
28 Coppers in Yemeni capital cut composer (7)
30 Buffy's small bed (6)

A first prize of a £30 John Lewis voucher and two runners-up prizes of £20 vouchers for the first correct solutions opened on 3 August. Please scan or photograph entries and email them (including the crossword number in the subject field) to **crosswords@spectator.co.uk**, or post to: Crossword 2761, The Spectator, 22 Old Queen Street, London SW1H 9HP.

Name .....

Address .....

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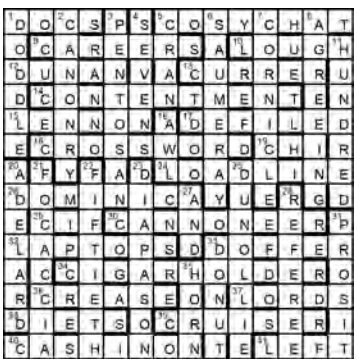


SOLUTION TO 2758: THOUSA

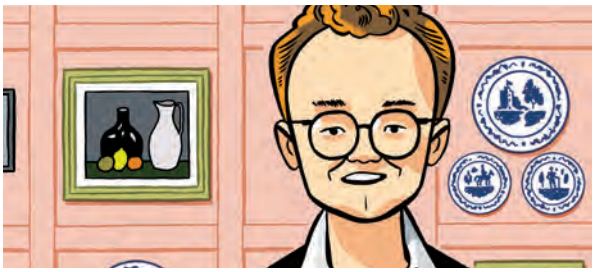
Each of the six quartets of initial letters of the Across clues reveal DCLL which equals 750. When correctly arranged, the unclued lights reveal 'Doc's seven hundred and fifti-eth crossword'. The title 'Thousa' is three-quarters of 1,000 which is 750.

First prize Gerald Daly, Ockendon, Essex
Runners-up Barbara Flook, Meareway, Glastonbury; Alistair Macnab, Hastings

Food

Hello, Mr Chips

Angus Colwell



It's a Saturday afternoon and I've just walked into The Pineapple in north London, thus becoming the 4,825th journalist to do so since Keir Starmer became Labour leader. He once described this pub as his 'church'. What that means is unclear. Does he take his sins here for absolution? Does he feel a sense of obligation to it? Does he come here on Sunday mornings?

As the prime-ministerial handover takes place, it's worth considering the old guy and the new guy's approach to food and drink (this column thinks so, anyway).

Starmer didn't have a favourite novel and he didn't have a favourite poem. But what he did like was food. He said he enjoyed going to Rossella, an Italian restaurant in Kentish Town. The tandoori salmon he made on *Sunday Brunch* actually looked nice. We know of two of his breakfasts. I tried the first one last week: 'a little bit of fish and a little bit of cheese', which he ate from a buffet at 2021's Labour conference in front of a disturbed journalist. I bought a tin of sardines and some cheap packet Edam and it was tasty. Fish and cheese work together, as long as (like with a tuna melt) it's not real fish and it's not real cheese. His other favourite breakfast was a bowl of plain baked beans. In Spain this would be called *alubias con tomate* and would 'heal the sick' or something.

Burnham does have serious interests but on food and drink he's worse than Starmer

A prime-ministerial love of food isn't a given. Some of the more hapless PMs were surprisingly astute: Theresa May owned a library of good cookbooks, while Liz Truss was a devotee of the peerless Bleecker Burger. More distressingly, Margaret Thatcher liked a dish of beef consommé, cream cheese and curry powder. I watched Tony Blair malfunction on a podcast recently, when he said that his family get wound up by him judging restaurants entirely on 'what I call the bread test' (does the place make its own bread?).

Presumably Starmer's behaviour in restaurants is a little more sane. But I hope he comes to The Pineapple for the pints and not the food. It is a gorgeous place: lots of brass and a delightful conservatory, one that I would sit in if it wasn't the temperature of a fertiliser plant in Burkina Faso. And it has a Thai menu. Some pubs have Thai kitchens because you can do lots of dishes from a few frozen ingredients, and others have them because the landlord brought back someone from his travels.

We order Starmer-y things: he doesn't eat meat, remember, so we have the deep-fried vegetable platter (£7.50) and stir-fried vegetables (£11.50). They are appalling, but it is like judging a dog on its juggling: this isn't why I like you.

Back in the *Spectator* office, we try a taste of the new. Andy Burnham doesn't have an explicit favourite restaurant, so instead, I head to Westminster's Laughing Halibut, Burnham's new nearest chippy, to pick up 'chips and gravy' (his answer to the question 'What is your favourite biscuit?'). The best thing about chips is their crispiness, so of course Burnham makes them soggy. I don't get it, and I'm not sure my colleagues did either. If you're scared that *Spectator* staffers are all wet London liberals, I can't allay your fears: only two tried them without me telling them to.

Of course, Burnham does have serious interests – he likes Larkin and Shakespeare and the Stone Roses – and that does matter. But on food and drink, he's worse than Starmer, who, if he is destined to spend the rest of his life wondering what went wrong, at least has the good fortune to do so in a beautiful pub.

The Pineapple, 51 Leverton Street, London NW5 2NX; tel: 0207 2844631.

DEAR MARY YOUR PROBLEMS SOLVED

Q. When guests are leaving our house they sometimes ask: 'Would you like me to strip my bed?' The truthful answer is often: 'No, because you are very clean and only stayed one night and I may decide to reuse your bed for one of the hulking slob friends of my son who stay.' But if I say this, the guest might wonder if they went into 'pre-used' sheets. Worst-case scenario, they do not ask and turn up downstairs with an armful of bedding. What should I do?
– C.W., Stoke Abbott, Dorset

A. When asked by a guest if they should strip the sheets, reply: 'Please don't. Our daily has such little self-esteem as it is, she would really mind if you cheated her of the whole job.'

Q. I recently travelled from London to the Lake District by train for a wonderful new book festival. I had reserved a seat in advance so I could work but was startled to find a very well-dressed lady sitting there on arriving in the crowded carriage. Imagine my surprise when, following a polite request, she point-blank refused to move, saying she needed to face forward and I would have to find another seat. I remonstrated but to no effect – she remained in the seat. I was rendered speechless and decided I couldn't call on the overworked steward to come to my assistance, so sheepishly shuffled off to sit nearby. At one point, my adversary got up to go to the loo, at which point her neighbours (who had observed the goings-on) all energetically encouraged me to reclaim my seat. I decided life was too short for such antics and stoically remained where I was. Mary, what would you have done – and is this the end of civilisation?
– J.B., Conock, Devizes, Wilts

A. It is not yet the end. Some disabilities are invisible – as the fridge magnets tell us – and your purpose would have been best served by assuming this was one such. You should have sought out the steward and, showing your ticket, conveyed your sympathy towards the seat-blocker, suggesting her discourteous behaviour was incompatible with her respectable self-presentation, and so a mental health issue was at play. Like all functionaries, the steward would have been thrilled to resolve an issue involving disability and would have rushed to reseat you in first class at no extra cost.

Q. During the hot weather my local supermarket sells out of gazpacho very quickly. But you can make your own by just scissoring spring onions, cucumber and some garlic into bought tomato juice.
– C.B., Newcastle, Co. Down

A. Many thanks for this tip.

Write to Dear Mary at dearmary@spectator.co.uk

There have been some poorly looking folk wandering about *Spectator* Towers recently. I've lost count of the number of ashen faces I've clocked, their owners clinging feebly to the banisters for support or hiding whimpering in dark corners. One or two looked far, far from well. If I were their mother – or their doctor – I would have told them to stay in bed.

In fairness, it has been a deliciously drink-soaked couple of weeks. Our free-flowing, inaugural *Spectator* English Wine Festival in the garden was followed by a very fine rosé-fuelled Provençal soirée with Catriona Olding and Martin Vander Weyer and that by the notoriously bibulous *Spectator* Summer Party, about which 'nuff said.

Then came our annual Readers' 'Tea' Party (hmm, Pimm's party more like) and the joint *Spectator*/Boisdale Cigar Garden Party, where neither wine nor whisky was found wanting. Indeed, so pleasantly soused was I that I didn't even manage to finish my bottle of M&S Mâcon on the midnight train home.

But this is *The Spectator*, not the *New Statesman*, and we just regroup and push on. And so, with the hols upon us, I hope you'll join me in getting stuck into these six summery whites (and one rosé). It's vital to keep one's liquid intake up.

Served ice-cold, the 2025 Pontemagno Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi Classico (1) makes a brilliant aperitif. Produced at a 100-year-old estate in the heart of the Castelli di Jesi DOC, in Italy's Le Marche, it's bone-dry, lean, spare, mineral and fresh with just a little toasty something on the finish. You should have some constantly on standby in the fridge. £9 down from £9.95.

Sicily's signature grape, Grillo, is increasingly popular and the 2025 Rupe Secca (2), from vineyards near Marsala in the far west of the island, is a cracker. Dry to off-dry, it's lightly honeyed and full of baked apple, citrus and even a touch of peach. Mrs Ray, who'd heard the cork pop and had come down to see what the fuss was about, reckoned it became more Viognier-like as she went down the bottle. £10 down from £10.95.

And talking of Viognier, do give the 2024 Chants du Closeau, Viognier (3) from Les Producteurs Réunis de Cebazan near Béziers, a go. Unoaked, pure and fresh, it, too, is delectably dry to off-dry and even more marked by peach, apricot and pear. 'Yep, like it!' declared Mrs R discerningly. £10 down from £10.95.

The 2025 Carlomagno Fiano (4) from Puglia, in Italy's heel, also hit the spot. My ever-loving reckoned it was sprightly and characterful. It was certainly fresh, lively and enticing with decent weight from three months on the lees and with plenty of almost tropical fruit – melon, pineapple and a touch of lemon sherbet. £10.25 down from £11.45.

With the hols upon us, I hope you'll join me in getting stuck into these six summery whites (and one rosé)

If you know me at all, you know how much I love the wines of Alsace and the 2024 Dopff & Irion 'Cuvée Renée Dopff' Gewurztraminer (5) is a fine example of that region's signature grape. We've visited Dopff & Irion on our *Spectator* Wine Club tours of Alsace and this always goes down well with its hints of rose petals, lychees and ripe pears, all wrapped up with a spicy finish. £14.50 down from £15.95.

The 2024 Collovray & Terrier, Saint-Véran Réserve (6) from Christian Collovray and Jean-Luc Terrier – Gault & Millau's recent Burgundy Winemakers of the Year – is a joy. Full-bodied and lightly honeyed, it's a lusciously juicy 100 per cent Chardonnay. 'Robust enough to go with food,' said Mrs Ray draining her glass without a snack in sight. £17.50 down from £18.95.

Finally, the 2024 Higham Vineyard 'Higham Pink' Single Estate English Rosé (7) from Suffolk. We love English wine at *The Spectator* and I'm delighted to offer this pale, onion-skin pink Pinot Noir for consideration. Soft, smooth and silky, it's full of summer fruits with just a teasing touch of lemon 'n' lime on the finish. Perfect for an English summer. £19.75 down from £24.95.

The mixed case (8) has two bottles of wines 1-6 and wine 7 is offered in boxes of six. Delivery, as ever, is free.

To find out more about our Winemaker Lunches, Masterclasses and Wine Tours, visit spectator.com/tastings

ORDER FORM *Spectator Wine Offer*

www.mrwheelerwine.com/spectator
Mr Wheeler, Estate Office, Park Lane BC, Langham, Colchester, Essex CO4 5WR
tel: 01206 713560; email: hello@mrwheelerwine.com

Prices in form are per case of 12 unless otherwise stated			*List*	*Club*
White	1	2025 Pontemagno Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi Classico, 13%	~~£119.40~~	£108.00
	2	2025 Rupe Secca, Grillo di Sicilia, 12%	~~£131.40~~	£120.00
	3	2024 Chants du Closeau, Viognier, 12.5%	~~£131.40~~	£120.00
	4	2025 Carlomagno Fiano, 12.5%	~~£137.40~~	£123.00
	5	2024 Dopff & Irion Gewurztraminer, 12.5%	~~£191.40~~	£174.00
	6	2024 Collovray & Terrier, Saint-Véran Réserve, 13%	~~£227.40~~	£210.00
Rosé	7	2024 Higham Vineyard 'Higham Pink', 12% (six bottles)	~~£149.70~~	£118.50
Mixed	8	Mixed case (two each of wines 1-6)	~~£156.40~~	£142.50

Prices include VAT and delivery on the British mainland.
This offer, which is subject to availability, closes on 22 August.
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No sacred cows

Call yourselves football fans?

Toby Young

Last week I watched a clip of Ian Wright explaining why it meant so much to him, as a black former player, that Jude Bellingham is uninhibited about revelling in his achievements. In the past, he said, some black players had been criticised for being too cocky, as though they'd forgotten their place. So he was pleased that it is now completely acceptable for a black player to strut around with a bit of swagger.

I can see his point, but I also thought: why do you have to racialise this remarkable young player? Can't we just celebrate him as an Englishman? England's progress in the World Cup is one of those moments in which we're supposed to set our differences aside and come together. Shoehorning identity politics into football is precisely why I disliked the sermonising Gareth Southgate and much prefer the goofy, apolitical Thomas Tuchel.

But I'm going to commit a similar faux pas and say something divisive. I watched England beat Norway in the garden of a crowded pub in Chiswick and felt there was something a bit fake about the beer-throwing and cheering when Bellingham scored. The crowd was young and gave off a privately educated vibe, and it was as if they were LARPing at being England fans. 'Plastics', as we proper supporters call them.

The crowd was young and gave off a privately educated vibe, and it was as if they were LARPing at being fans

I'm not saying this because they were middle-class – which would be too hypocritical even for me. But there was something performative about their enthusiasm. How many of them had, like me, travelled thousands of miles to see England draw 0-0 in a World Cup qualifier? How many of them had braved a mob of rioting North Africans to see England beat Tunisia in Marseille, as I had? I felt a bit as I did when QPR played Derby in the play-off final in 2014. Looking around at the 40,000 Hoops fans filling one half of Wembley stadium, I thought: 'Where have you been for the past ten years?'

At popular away games, such as FA Cup matches against Premier League clubs, this problem doesn't arise, because QPR's seat allocation is reserved for those with sufficient 'loyalty points', which you accumulate by buying tickets to away fixtures. The less glamorous and further away the ground, the more points you get. Should a similar system be introduced at beer gardens and fan parks when England are playing, with only those who've turned up to see friendlies and UEFA Nations League games being admitted? Or maybe a simpler test: 'Recite the words to Ten German Bombers or you're not coming in.' That would certainly please curmudgeonly old gits like me, but would go against the inclusive grain of the World Cup.

I expect some of my irritation is because I'm a QPR season ticket-holder. Loyal fans of ordinary clubs always look down their noses at supporters of the national team, who by definition only materialise every couple of years. That goes double for fans of unfashionable clubs who lose more often than they win. We resent the fact that these Johnny-come-latelies are enjoying a team making a successful cup run without having had to endure all those losses on a rainy Tuesday night. It's an inverse snobbery born of misery, and sitting around in pubs at away games often reminds me of Monty Python's 'Four Yorkshiremen' sketch, with fans competing to describe their worst experiences.

There's also the widespread prejudice among die-hard supporters that caring too much about England's results is a little suspect. Yes, it's nice when we win, but it scarcely matters in the grand scheme of things, which is how your club performs. Indeed, some fans don't like it when their best players are called up, because there's a risk they'll get injured and won't be available at the beginning of next season. The underlying assumption is that your support for a team is a zero-sum commodity, so being too enthusiastic about England inevitably means you care less about your own club, and that is where your true loyalties should lie. For some, getting excited about the national team is a sure sign you're a 'plastic'.

All this I know, and, as I say, my enjoyment of England's victory over Norway was tainted by the chippy resentment I felt towards the other revellers. But at the same time I can't help getting swept up by the national hysteria surrounding the tournament. I suppose I should be happy that the entire country now shares the same passion as me, short-lived though it is. At the time of writing we still have to play Argentina, but if we beat them I will be all in. I wouldn't go as far as to say I would prefer England to win the World Cup than QPR to win the league, but it will be a close-run thing.

MICHAEL HEATH

The Wiki Man

When in doubt, follow the money

Rory Sutherland

As a more philosophical alternative to 'You don't have to be mad to work here, but it helps', you occasionally see workplace posters which read: 'Price. Speed. Quality. Pick any two.' Unless you work on public infrastructure in the UK, of course, where the sign presumably ends: 'Why not consult some lawyers and avoid all three?'

In 1922 Trumpington, in South Cambridge, briefly had its own railway station. This was built to bring visitors to the Royal Agricultural Society's show, which ran for five days, after which the station was demolished. Nearly a century later, it was sensibly decided that South Cambridge deserved a new, more permanent station. It took six years of planning before building work started. The station opened last month at a total cost of £228 million.

To its credit, the building is a tad more attractive than the new Thanet Parkway station, but then so is the station at Auschwitz. Thanet Parkway, however, as its name suggests, does have one virtue. You can actually park there. South Cambridge station has space for 1,000 bicycles, but a total of five blue-badge parking spaces for cars. Nothing else. Actually, scratch that. The station does not really offer any provision for disabled drivers. That's because five spaces are so few that no one can set off to the station from home confidently expecting a disabled space to be available. Which means that in practice it might as well not have any spaces at all.

In our despair over HS2 we should not forget that the UK has also seen remarkable transport successes

Questions were duly raised in the House of Lords. The reply cited something called 'environmental impact studies' – a formulation that encompasses any manner of contrived and cherry-picked variables to allow ideologically motivated bureaucrats to mark their own homework. Given that Cambridgeshire contains no natural features of any interest whatsoever, it isn't altogether clear to me what such a study would involve. (In 1083, the local population were forced to build Ely Cathedral simply to have something interesting to look at.)

Yet 'intermodality' – the ease of switching from one form of transport to another – provides the best return on transport investment. As Mark Bostock, the brains behind HS1, explained: 'Connectivity beats speed every time.' Hence you need railway car parks to be big, since if drivers are unsure there will be space available for parking, a station is virtually useless. (If they had the wit to do so, rail companies could make a fortune selling pre-reserved parking spaces at a premium. If you want motorists to take trains, first reassure them that there is a place to leave their car.)

But here's the real question. Why are so many transport decisions taken using theoretical models when there is an abundance of real-world evidence to show what really works? In our despair over HS2, we should not forget that the UK has also seen remarkable transport successes, all providing reliable clues to what passengers really want: HS1, London Overground, the DLR, Lumo trains, London City airport, even the Heathrow Pod – all provide lessons that could be applied elsewhere. Yet little of the learning from HS1 carried over to HS2.

One obvious finding is that well-served stations located outside a city with abundant parking – think Ebbsfleet or Bristol Parkway – are insanely popular despite the egregiously high prices charged to park there. Why drive into the centre of a congested city just to take a train straight out again?

Why is intermodality ignored? One eminent expert explained it to me on condition of anonymity: 'Train people are obsessed with trains, bus people are obsessed with buses, Tube people are obsessed with the Tube: they all secretly despise other modes of transport.'

Observing existing behaviour is always more valuable than theoretical expertise. For all capitalism's faults, money acts as a truth drug. You can only find out what people really want when you make them pay for it.

To book tickets to An Evening with Rory Sutherland: The World according to the Wiki Man *on 29 July at the Emmanuel Centre in London, go to spectator.com/events*

ANCIENT AND MODERN

Farage's fear

If Nigel Farage is so confident that the £5 million donation he received from a friend is entirely kosher, why is he so frightened of being subjected to the official parliamentary code of conduct on the matter, or does he think he is above such scrutiny? That is a dangerous tightrope to tread.

In 406 BC, after a naval battle in the long war between Sparta and Athens, a ferocious storm prevented the Athenian generals from picking up their survivors and the dead. In the law-making democratic Assembly, consisting of all Athenian male citizens over 18 (the *dêmos*), fury was high, and there was a demand from one Callixenos that the six out of the eight generals who had returned to Athens should be tried en bloc. When it was pointed out that this was illegal, the majority shouted that 'it was outrageous that the *dêmos* should not be allowed to do whatever it wanted'. After all, the *dêmos* made the law. Why could not the *dêmos* change it?

Socrates was then a member of the Council of 500 and, for that one day, the presiding chairman at the trial. He refused to yield to the demand, because it was against the law. The next day's chairman, however, agreed to it, and the trial en bloc went ahead. The six generals were executed.

But the Athenians always took the view that, if the *dêmos* decided someone had given them bad advice, even if the *dêmos* had agreed to it, that was no defence: the *dêmos* could do no wrong. But some months later, the *dêmos* itself realised that the precedent which it had created was unwise. So they lodged proceedings against Callixenos and his supporters. Summoned to be put on trial for deceiving the *dêmos* (penalty: death), they were saved by the chaos during the end of the war.

It is almost unbelievable that someone who aspires to be prime minister should be so utterly contemptuous of official codes of conduct which, as prime minister, he would be responsible for framing and upholding. What's new? The usual farrago.

— *Peter Jones*

Seen elsewhere

Restore resurgent

Red Squirrel

As seen on X

‘Subversive.’ With this word I sign off my vitriolic X reply to Beth Rigby, who has once again failed to endorse Restore Britain live on Sky News. With the monthly online-right Folkmoot taking place this afternoon at the Boar’s Head on Stockport high street, a show of force like this would be essential in rallying the troops.

For the troops were wavering. Rupert Lowe has been making a series of alarming gaffes of late – distancing himself from ethnic nationalism, and indeed, national socialism. It came as a great shock to us that this 68-year-old business associate of Rishi Sunak’s wife and personal friend of much of the Conservative front bench had failed to endorse either of these platforms. As deputy of communications for Restore’s South-East Manchester branch, it has fallen to me to reassure my frightened flock.

‘I don’t know… I just feel that Rupert may have… fallen,’ says Tom Heatherspoon, known as Lincolnshire_Yeoman on X, staring down at his bitter shandy. I trot out one of my pre-prepared lines. ‘Mate, listen, I see where you’re coming from, yeah.’ I clear my throat. ‘Restore is only six months old. There were always going to be teething problems. All I’d say, mate, is please just give us some time while we sort through them, yeah?’

A show of force at the Boar’s Head would be essential in rallying the troops

Lincolnshire_Yeoman nods slowly. I decide to press my advantage. ‘The thing you’ve got to remember, yeah, is that our guys are on the ball with this stuff. The Zoomer right. They say that Rupert is about to apologise for the Soviet occupation of Berlin on behalf of Restore Britain!’

UK_Ferret444, also known as Colin Samuels, crosses his arms. ‘Yeah mate, but when? You’ve been promising things like this for months now.’ Wotan’s beard! I knew UK_Ferret444 might be difficult, but I never thought it’d be this bad.

I flash a winsome smile. ‘Sure mate, sure. But just wait till you hear this. I have it on good authority that Rupert is about to make a big announcement about the need to ban schools from serving curry, pad thai and other subversive slop.’

UK_Ferret444 looks unmoved. Lincolnshire_Yeoman slumps dejectedly. It’s not going to plan at all. Suddenly my good friend Saxon_Rage, real name Jimmy Sport, chimes in: ‘So chaps, how about we drain our pints, then go blow up a police station!’

The assembled Anglos look at him quizzically. ‘And before we do that,’ Saxon_Rage continues, ‘how about we all write down our real names and addresses in my special book, as a sort of team-building exercise!’

I smile indulgently at Saxon_Rage. It is only a month since we met in a Discord chat, but we’ve already become close friends. ‘I’m really in the mood to violate Section 5 of the Public Order Act 1986, pertaining to harassment, alarm or distress,’ he chirps. ‘How about it, lads? Shall we just bloody crack on with it?’

‘What was your name again, mate?’ UK_Ferret444 asks.

‘Oh, I’m Bill – er, sorry, Sam. J- J- James? JIMMY!’ he exclaims, sounding relieved. ‘Yes, my name is actually Jimmy. That’s definitely my name.’ He glances at me furtively.

‘Don’t worry mate,’ I say. ‘It’s okay to be nervous. This is your first Folkmoot, after all.’ Jimmy smiles wanly. A sort of static noise starts emanating from his pocket, and Jimmy fiddles with the earpiece he always seems to be wearing.

Oh dear. Jimmy isn’t helping things. But I have one last card to play.

‘And don’t forget, lads. For just £800,000, Restore Britain was able to produce a 218-page report on the rape gangs, recapitulating articles in the *Telegraph*. That’s £3,700 per page – a bargain – replete with quotes by Nietzsche and Albert Einstein, and unsubstantiated claims about atrocity livestreams. If we could just get Rupert through at least one interview without him claiming nobody in India received the Covid vaccine, I think we’ve got a real chance of taking power.’

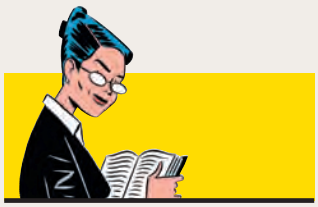
MIND YOUR LANGUAGE

Vanishingly unlikely

When my husband asked me whether I knew any mathematics at all, I replied by telling him that I had been a properly brought-up girl. The cause of our little wrangle was the phrase *vanishingly unlikely*.

A newspaper article on scams pointed out that ‘only a tiny minority of oil workers are women, meaning it is vanishingly unlikely to meet a real one online’. Another said that ‘Britain is vanishingly unlikely to meet Nato’s target of spending 5 per cent of GDP on national security by 2035.’

In both those examples,



vanishingly is used in the sense ‘infinitesimally’. But the meaning properly wanted here is ‘hugely’ or ‘almost infinitely’ unlikely. It is the likelihood that is vanishingly small. The unlikelihood is very great.

This is different from *vanishingly small*, which is just something so small as to vanish, or even *vanishingly rare*, which is something so rare as to become invisible to inspection.

My husband’s mathematical challenge was directed to what he saw as my weakness in not understanding calculus and allied trades. There are, for example, things called vanishing fractions. A vanishing fraction reduces to the form zero over zero for a particular value of the variable which enters it. But I don’t think this has any bearing on vanishing likelihood.

With *vanishingly unlikely*, I think we are caught in the same positive/negative muddle that makes people say *not unsurprisingly* when they mean ‘unsurprisingly’. Listen out to news programmes like *Today* and you’ll hear them do it, quite unaware.

It’s quite a boring thing to say that something is unsurprising in the first place. I’m afraid that the World Cup has brought it to a very florid state: ‘Argentina have unsurprisingly been unable to retain possession.’ The author might as well have written *uninterestingly*. But if he’d been delivering his opinions orally he’d have been likely to say *not unsurprisingly*.

— Dot Wordsworth

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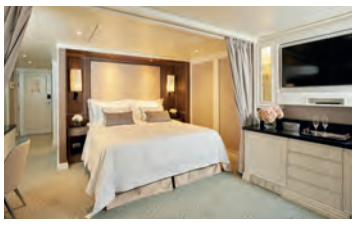

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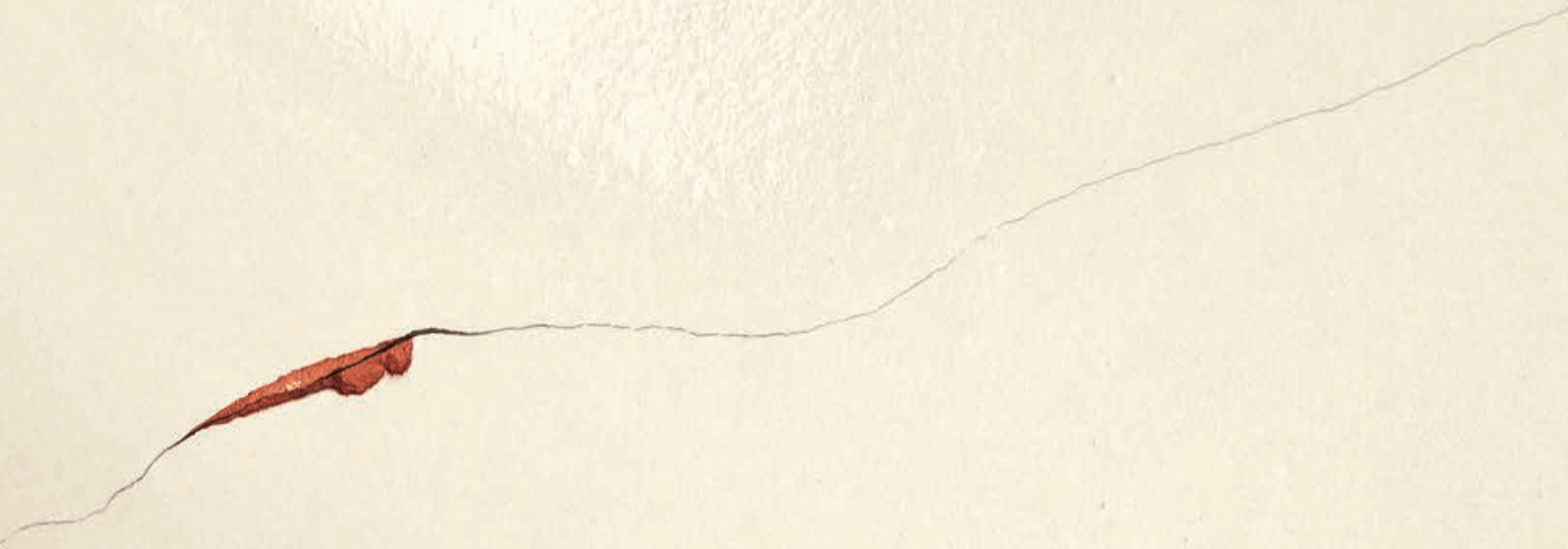

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